



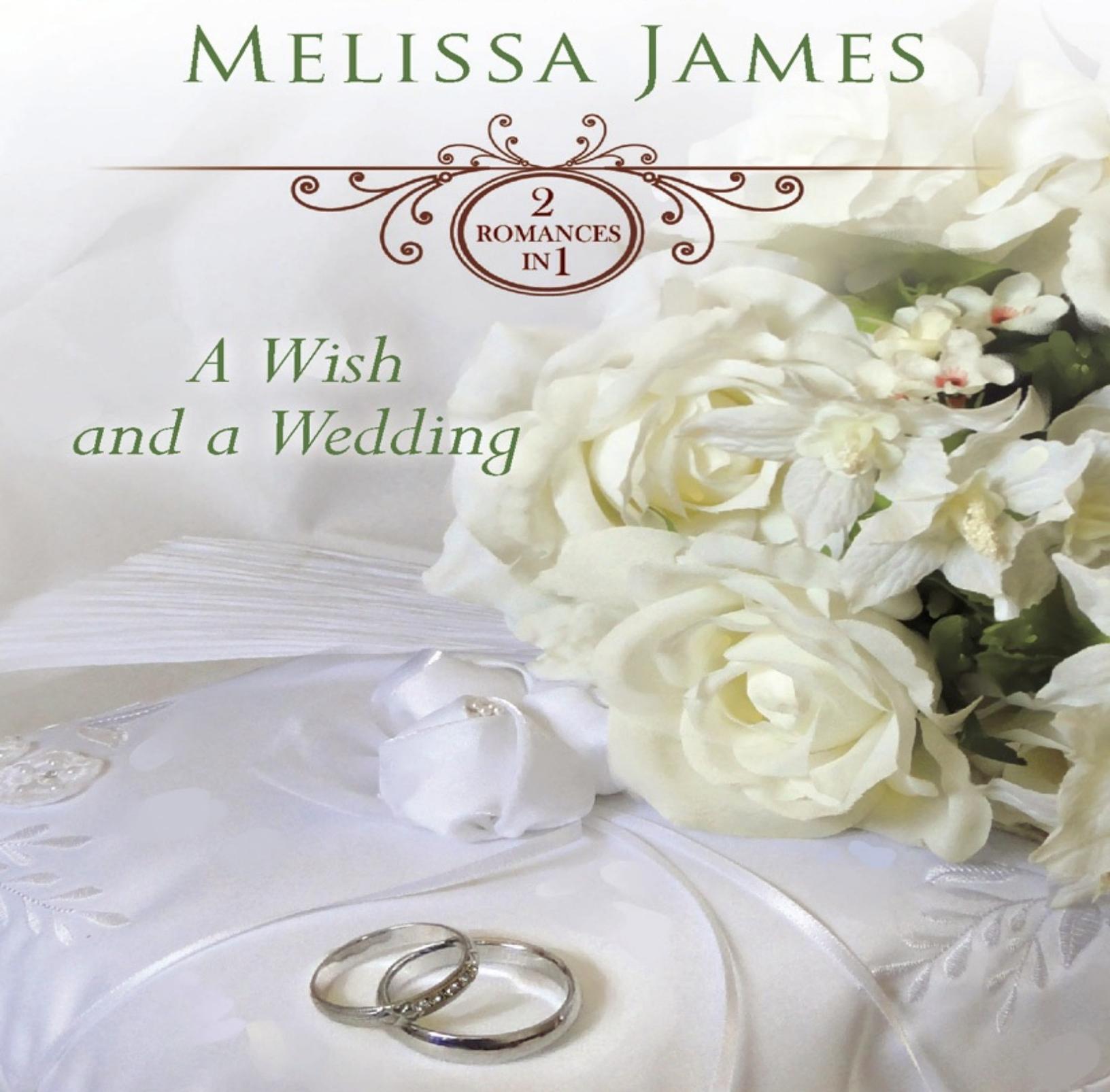
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MELISSA JAMES

A Wish and a Wedding



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MARGARET WAY

Master of Mällarinka

Margaret Way, a definite Leo, was born and raised in the subtropical river city of Brisbane, capital of the Sunshine State of Queensland. A conservatorium-trained pianist, teacher, accompanist and vocal coach, she found that her musical career came to an unexpected end when she took up writing—initially as a fun thing to do. She currently lives in a harborside apartment at beautiful Raby Bay, a thirty-minute drive from the state capital, where she loves dining al fresco on her plant-filled balcony, overlooking a translucent green marina filled with all manner of pleasure craft—from motor cruisers costing millions of dollars and big, graceful yachts, with carved masts standing tall against the cloudless blue sky, to little bay runabouts. No one and nothing is in a mad rush, and she finds the laid-back village atmosphere very conducive to her writing. With well over 100 books to her credit, she still believes her best is yet to come.

PROLOGUE

ON HER sixteenth birthday Victoria Rushford, already dubbed “the beautiful Rushford heiress” by a media that appeared to be growing bigger with every passing year, had overreached herself terribly. She had done something so reckless, so utterly *gauche*, that four years later the sheer awfulness of it brought a burning blush to her cheeks and an agonised groan from her throat. The incident, a by-product of her pathetic neediness—she really was the proverbial poor little rich girl—had turned a delirium of expectation into a catastrophe inconceivable only the day before. The Disaster—she always thought of it that way—had divided her and Haddo for ever. Never again could they be natural with one another. Never again would they be friends after a lifetime of bonding.

Overnight she had become disconnected from her moorings. She had gone from hero-worshipping Haddo—perfect in her mind, fantastic, dashing, a thousand times more sexy than any guy she knew or ever expected to know, twenty-five to her sixteen—to actively hating him. That was how deep the wounds went. Hating was a development that often occurred when someone was profoundly humiliated, especially after long being held in the greatest affection.

She had never in her wildest dreams imagined Haddo could turn on her the way he had. It suggested dark depths of feeling she had been totally unaware of. For chilling moments she had feared he was going to fling her bodily out of his room, such had been his shock and apparent aversion. Memories were torture, but there were times one couldn’t stop them rolling. It was pretty much like being forced to watch a video that was enormously distressing...

The homestead was in darkness. Haddo’s suite of rooms was in the West Wing, which meant that instead of doing it with ease, considering the number of times she had walked it, she had to inch her way along the long baronial-style gallery. It was hung with paintings, and antique chairs were set at intervals, just in case someone got the urge to sit down and study the family heirlooms. Huge Chinese porcelain vases stood on stands—*famille rose*, *famille verte*, *famille noir*, you name it. The vases were so valuable they should have been in glass cases, but

what the heck? This was the ancestral home, not a museum.

She kept moving in a straight line, hoping to goodness she wouldn't veer off to left or right and knock into something. How unlucky would that be? It would be fatal to wake anyone. Quite a few of the rellies who had turned up for her birthday party were sleeping behind those closed doors. Mercifully a couple of them, septuagenarians, were deaf. She understood many problems arose at that age, but at sixteen, seventy plus was such a long way off it was in a totally separate time zone.

She had timed her move exactly to two-thirty. Anyone would think she had a train to catch. Was three a.m. the witching hour? Or was that midnight? She was reduced to giggles. Either way, two-thirty seemed like a good time. Normal people were fast asleep. She had only just achieved lift-off.

Broad rays of moonlight poured through the tall stained glass windows at the top of the staircase, drenching the landing in radiant white light. That calmed her. She wasn't one of those people who favoured the dark. She always had to have light. Now, with the moonlight, she could very nearly see. She hoped she wouldn't encounter the Rushford ghost. Very likely the ghost was about. She was pretty blasé about the whole thing. Every historic house had a ghost or two. It stood to reason that occasionally paths would cross.

Their particular ghost was Eliza Rushford, who had died in childbirth in the late 1800s at the tender age of eighteen. Way too young to start a family! Heaven must have been full up at the time, because Eliza hung around the gallery to this day, drifting up and down it, beckoning to those who had the ability to see her to come and visit the old nursery. Great-Aunt Philippa—she who had trained Victoria to walk about balancing a book on her head—claimed to have seen Eliza many times, and once even got into an in-depth discussion with her, regarding the high mortality rate in childbirth in those days. Otherwise Great-Aunt Philippa, known as Pip, was a remarkably sensible woman, and a wonderful musician.

“I could have been a concert pianist, Tori dear. I was just that good!”

Anyway, Pip sat on the board of the Rushford Pastoral Company and did an excellent job. She knew a humungous amount of stuff—she could easily have won the top quiz shows—and she was great fun. Unlike her sister, Great-Aunt Bea, spinster by choice, who took the fun out of everything.

Victoria didn't really believe in ghosts herself. She had never seen hide nor hair of her adored departed father, Michael, though she and Pip had once had a shot at summoning him up at a séance—until Bea had put a stop to it.

“You can't leave well alone, can you, Philippa?” Bea had said. “Leave the poor child alone. She's screwed up enough as it is!” Great-Aunt Bea was a fine

one to talk.

Stealing on, barefoot—how she wished for a flaming torch—Victoria finally made it to Haddo’s bedroom door without mishap. She was amazed she was actually capable of doing this. If things went wrong she could always claim she was sleepwalking. An excessively bitchy girlfriend of Haddo’s had once called her a “cheeky little brat!” Jealous, of course.

The door wasn’t locked. The brass hinges didn’t squeak. Haddo would have had them oiled if they did. She had no trouble easing the door open. He was lying on his back in the huge bed, his breathing deep and quiet. She would have been astounded if he had been snoring. Haddo was just too cool! He didn’t even stir at her unauthorised entry, though she swallowed hard herself.

So far so good. Fortune favoured the brave. She loved the idea of that.

Moonlight glittered on the verandah. The French doors were wide open to the desert breeze that carried with it the scent of the beautiful boronia. It billowed the filmy central drops of the curtains, with their rich tapestry drapes to either side. A clock was ticking away—not loudly, but perfectly audible in the silvery dark. She couldn’t sleep with a ticking clock in the room herself. She just hoped this one didn’t chime the quarter-hour. That would have been too unnerving.

She started forward, feeling as if she was floating. Her dark red hair tumbled down her back—masses of it. Coils of it twined around her throat and her shoulders. She had arranged it that way to hide her elf’s ears. For the first time in her life she truly felt beautiful. She wasn’t one of those people who found her looks entrancing.

She lifted the cream satin-bound hem of her luxurious nightgown clear of the Persian rug, in case she tripped and fell to the floor. That would totally destroy the romance of her entry. It was a beautiful garment, glamorous and seductive; in fact the first glamorous, seductive nightie she had ever owned. She had secretly bought it in an exclusive little shop that sold the most *amazing* lingerie—very naughty. The nightie was a bit big, but the smallest she’d been able to get. There wasn’t a great deal of her—especially in the bosom department. But she did feel very much a woman on the threshhold of life.

Haddo’s breathing abruptly changed. The swiftness of it took her by surprise. She shook violently. Then he moved. He kicked back the top sheet, turning his dark head on the pillow in her direction. Maybe he thought she was the ghost of Eliza? Maybe poor Eliza often used his shoulder to cry on? Most women would die to.

His voice when it came was half-drugged with sleep. “Tori, is that you?”

She was transfixated. She didn’t answer, *Yes, Haddo, it’s me*. Instead she

thought, *Oh, my gosh, what have I done?* The whole thing was unreal.

She detoured around a chair, then swam closer to the bed on a wave of euphoria. Her eyes were riveted on Haddo's long lean frame. His splendid torso was naked, but she saw he was wearing a pair of boxer shorts. She gulped. When it came right down to it she wanted to start the seduction *slowly*. The top sheet was now tangled up in his long straight legs.

Haddo—her safe haven! Only tonight was special: an uncharted adventure, a voyage of discovery. She was at the side of his high bed. It had been custom-made for a big man—Haddo was six-three. She clambered onto it—not without difficulty. She would have been far better off with a short nightie, but nothing could detract from her ecstasy of yearning. Oh, to lie down with him, beside him, on top of him, under him—to breathe in the same air. It filled her with so much elation she gave a throbbing little moan. If this wasn't the greatest moment of her life, what was?

I've done it! she thought ecstatically, feeling strange to herself, and more than a little wild. She had a definite sense Haddo thought she wasn't real, but that too was part of the extravagant adventure. Desire. Dreaming. He wouldn't be able to resist her. As a bereaved child, looking for love and protection, she had turned to Cousin Haddo out of everyone in her extended family as the source of comfort. Now she had a craving for something altogether different from him: the fulfilment of the bond that had been long years in the making.

To her unending joy, even triumph, he folded her body into him as though he was about to feast on it. It whipped up a fury of sensation, as if a bonfire had been lit inside her. She was instantly aflame. It was difficult for her not to cheer aloud. Then came the moment of supreme bliss. Her eyelids grew heavy, her coltish limbs languorous. Haddo's handsome dark head descended over hers...

Kiss me. Touch me. My body is ready for you.

Her brain had shut down at least an hour ago. Haddo, her wonderful Haddo, started kissing her with his beautiful, sensuous mouth. A line of sparkling stars trailed down her throat to between her breasts. Rapture pierced her. Her long legs were moving restlessly up and down on the sheet, turning out at the knees like the petals of a flower. She couldn't quite catch her breath. Her head was swimming. She had over-estimated her own ability to handle this level of emotion. It was so tumultuous it was an agony. She had a notion she was getting scared. She wanted to grab on to his shoulders, feel the strong bones and polished skin, beg him to give her a moment...

Only he had found her open waiting mouth, and his arousal was so powerful, so apparent, it electrified her, thrilling her out of her mind. She was desperate to lift her restless legs and wrap them around him—but she could hear the silk of

her nightgown tearing. She had never remotely been in the grip of such rapture before. She was right at its epicentre, dizzy with it, maybe a little stupefied it was so immense.

Her body was pinned to the mattress. It came to her in an overwhelming rush that Haddo was experienced. She wasn't. He had gone way beyond puppy love. She hadn't even started. She wasn't interested in sloppy teenage boys. Haddo, however, was a splendid young man who had always had girls queuing in line, each hoping she would be the one. How she had hated that! Hadn't any of them realised Haddo was waiting for *her*? Waiting patiently for a few years to pass?

Beneath her sheer nightgown she was naked, and it really, really felt like it. She was so acutely conscious of her own body he might have already tossed her nightie out onto the Persian rug. That was her small breast he was cupping with his hand, the throbbing nipple as ripe as a berry. It was such raging passion, tears sprang to her eyes. Sex was immense, and they had only just begun. For that matter, was she really *adult* enough for this?

I can't stand it.

Did she whimper it aloud? She must have.

The entire world came to a halt. Moments later it started up again, in case everyone got thrown off.

Haddo cried out. There was so much pain and shock in his voice, he might have been skewered, like Macbeth, by a dagger. His hand caught her wrists, pinning her to the bed. He was staring down at her as she lay back against the pillows, her long hair tumbling everywhere, the perfume she had misted all over her—every pulse-point, her navel, even the back of her knees—scenting the air around them.

“Tori?”

He sounded absolutely stunned. From groggy with sleep he was now on trigger alert.

“Oh, God, Tori, are you crazy?”

How ghastly was that? Tears sprang to her eyes. They slid silently down her cheeks. His tone was so accusatory she couldn't understand where he was coming from. It was as though he had started to speak to her in a foreign tongue. Not French, or Italian, or German. Nothing like that. At any rate, *crazy* was the very last word she had expected to hear. Were all men like this? Did every last one of them have tricks up their sleeve? She might have represented an extreme threat to his person. Worse, she might have been putting him in danger of committing a heinous crime. Her skin, so heated a moment before, turned to gooseflesh.

“For heaven's sake, Tori. What are you thinking of?” he groaned. “We can't

do this. We can't."

Out the words spilled, while her heart dropped to her feet like a stone. The air around them turned dense and suffocating, filled with a crackling electricity. Her whole body was receiving multiple shocks. She thought she would never forget the horror in his voice, the utter condemnation. Her wonderful birthday had been unimaginably spoiled.

"Tori!"

Why was he sounding as if he was overcome by guilt? Just how old did she have to *be*?

She pushed up, as frantic as he, their faces and bodies all but touching.

"What's happening here?" She heard her own voice, distraught.

He took her by the shoulders, holding her forcibly away from him. His strong hands trembled, as though he was afraid of her. This was like some weird romance, where the heroine got killed off in the first chapter.

I can't bear this!

Her body was pumping adrenalin. His was filled with a spring-loaded tension.

"What's wrong? Tell me? Don't you love me any longer?" God, she would die of abject shame if he said No. Or, worse, *I never did*. Nothing else for it after that but to jump out of the window.

"Tori, how can you ask?"

He sounded split apart. She had never ever seen Haddo agitated. He had always impressed her with his marvellous buoyant self-confidence, but a powerful agitation had clearly overtaken him. Scion of the legendary Rushford pioneering dynasty, Haddo had always used the lightest hand in all his dealings with her. He had smiled on her even when she was at her wildest—he had the best smile in the world—though admittedly she had on occasion been made to stand quietly while he delivered a few succinct words of caution. But all in all Haddo had treated her with such a broad deep affection it had forged what she had always believed was an unbreakable bond.

Who could blame her, then, if she was now utterly devastated by his bizarre reaction. The unbreakable bond that had tethered her to him appeared to be no more than gossamer-thin threads.

"All I wanted was your arms around me." She pressed her hands together in anguish, scalded by the inner knowledge that she had wanted so much more. "You know you're the one I turn to since Daddy went and left me."

Ironically her father, a renowned yachtsman, had been drowned in a freak accident off Sydney Heads. She had been twelve at the time. Twelve was such a crucial turning point in life—on the cusp of adolescence, when all those core

conflicts began to emerge. Any person of heart might find her actions understandable, even forgivable.

Not Haddo.

She had trusted him completely. Now he might as well have pushed her out of the Beech Baron minus her parachute.

“You can’t possibly stay here, Tori.”

If that wasn’t rejection, what was? She was diminished in his eyes, in her own eyes. Beyond consolation. What she had previously thought, she discovered to her great shame, was simply not true.

Except for the odd thing. And there was no getting away from it. Despite how he was acting—as if she had been attempting to rape him—there had been those brief moments when it was *he* who had handled her yielding body like the most ardent of lovers. It was *his* mouth that had covered hers so hungrily, his tongue that had lapped hers, his divine sex that had slammed into the delta of her throbbing body, as though desperate to plunge into her.

I didn’t imagine it! It had happened. Those were the moments that would be burned into her memory.

And why not? Those moments had shaped her.

Afterwards, with her name, her fortune, her beauty—which was to prove more problematic than anything else—and her social entrée, her relationship with Haddo had still played the dominant role in her life. And not only because he would control the purse strings until she was twenty-five. Despite how much she told herself she loathed him, everyone and everything paled before Haddo. He was the quintessential magnificent male. She had as good as convinced herself she couldn’t stand the sight of him, but her whole being yearned for what had been.

Even when her mind shut down on him, her body remembered. The terrible pity of it *then* was that she had been fool enough to believe she could bring a ravishing pleasure to them both. How could she have been so wrong? Surely what she had so strongly desired Haddo had too? How else was she to interpret the way he had been with her that special day? She’d been sixteen: a grown-up, a child no longer. And she had been lovely. Everyone had told her so. Except her mother, of course, who was never happy with her, no matter how she looked or what she did. But her mother, Livinia, hadn’t been there for her birthday.

Liv’s hectic social life—Victoria wasn’t supposed to call her Mum or Mother—centred around Sydney and Melbourne. Liv was way out of her element on Mellarinka. No one in the extended Rushford family liked her anyway, though

for the most part they did their best to hide it. All except Pip, who had a long, measuring stare and could be amazingly direct.

Victoria questioned herself constantly about what had happened. Was she certain of the way Haddo had looked up at her as she'd descended the central staircase in her beautiful emerald-green party dress? It had exactly matched her cat's eyes. Yes, she was. She would even swear to it in a court of law if she had to. Not that anyone would ask her to. She hadn't just invented what she saw in his eyes. They had sizzled over her with the blue intensity of a flame.

So, for the record, she hadn't imagined it. She had been tracking men's glances since she had turned fourteen—maybe since even earlier, when Liv had made the horrendous mistake of remarrying. Men were such lustful creatures. No wonder Great-Aunt Bea had never married—never had a steady relationship, for that matter, according to Pip, who had been very hotly desired herself. And hadn't she, Victoria, been the unfortunate recipient of many obsidian glances from her stepfather, Barry? Barry's slimy manner had impelled her to maintain a strict physical distance between them. Though she'd acted just this side of contemptuous with him, privately she had been fearful of the little dark urges towards her she'd read in his predatory eyes.

So, no use to turn to Livinia for protection and advice. Liv only saw what she wanted to see. Besides, Liv wasn't her friend. Liv was that aberration in nature: a woman who was jealous of her own daughter; her only child. Just to make the derangement more reprehensible, having done it once, Livinia had taken a vow that she would never go through the trauma of pregnancy and childbirth again. In other words, she'd got the maternal instinct right out of her system first time off.

"You were a daddy's girl right from the cradle." It had been a frequent accusation, as if the two of them, mother and daughter, were in fierce competition for Michael's attention. "After you were born he had no time for me."

Not strictly true. But close. Up until the age of twelve she had been the adored only child of a loving and admittedly overly-indulgent father. By then her father had been snatched away by a cruel fate, and a lecherous stepfather installed in his place.

Yes, Victoria knew when a man desired her. Only Haddo, a god to her, had turned on her as though she were a tart off the streets—someone who had somehow gained unlawful entry to his bed, with him, six foot three, superbly fit, lying there helpless.

"You're sixteen, Tori. A child. God, you're still at school!"

"Maybe I'll quit!" she had flung at him, at that point pierced by terrible

doubts. “So what have I done, Haddo? Please tell me. Have I broken some sacred code of honour? Some powerful taboo?”

She’d hated getting the tribal treatment. She had argued her innocence, all the while fierce little tears pouring down her cheeks.

“I can’t do this, Tori.” Haddo, breathing heavily, had put paid to her dreams. “You’re my cousin. It’s my job to look out for you—though God knows these days you’re making it bloody near impossible.”

She had been driven to attacking him, pounding the hard wall of his chest. He had let her, as though it was too much trouble to stop her. “We’re not first cousins, Haddo. We’re not even full second cousins. Great-Uncle Julien and Great-Uncle George were half-brothers with different mothers. Why are you so appalled?” She had reached out to him again, surrendering to one last moment of weakness

He’d held her off. “This can’t happen, Victoria. I don’t want to hurt you, but I’m going to take you back to your room. You’re beautiful—so beautiful! Your powers are staggering. I suspect they will only grow stronger. But I can’t—I won’t—let you try them out on me. No way could I forgive myself.”

“Or forgive me either!”

It was over. She had bitten off far more than she could chew.

Disgraced, she had wrenched herself away from him, half sliding half falling off the high bed, blinded by the long riotous masses of her hair. How had she got such uncontrollable hair anyhow—and why *red*? Liv insisted her hair was just like her aunt Rowena’s, whom no one had ever seen.

“You know what you’ve done, don’t you?” She had rounded on Haddo in a sick fury. “You’ve given me a life sentence.”

“Don’t be ridiculous” His voice, honed by privilege, had sounded unbearably well bred.

“I hate you—okay?” She, on the other hand, had sounded as grim as she felt. “I’ve got to go home. I can’t be near you for another day.”

He had made not the slightest attempt to dissuade her, nor sweetened it in any way. “That might be for the best, Tori,” he’d agreed. “I’ll organise it.”

It wasn’t until she was back in her own room that she began to cry her heart out, weeping until there were no more tears left and she fell into an exhausted sleep. The day that had begun with such golden promise had all of a sudden ended in ashes. Contrary to what she had been led to believe, she wasn’t even vaguely sexy. She didn’t inspire lust at all. At least not in Haddo. She had totally misread the look he had given her when she’d come down the staircase. She might

remember it for as long as she lived, but to Haddo she was ridiculous.
Her broken heart she kept secret for the next four years.

CHAPTER ONE

*The present—Mallarinka Station, Channel Country,
South-West Queensland*

SUNSET saw Haddo riding back to the homestead, dog-tired and yearning for an ice-cold beer and a shower, in that order. He couldn't wait for cooling rivulets of water to stream over his stressed, dehydrated body. He had even contemplated falling fully clothed into a billabong along the way, but hadn't thought he'd be able to drag himself out. Even his favourite workhorse, Fleetwood, was bone-weary.

"Only a kilometre to go, boy!" He patted the gelding's long satiny neck, offering encouragement. Fleetwood responded with a nodding motion of his proud, handsome head. Once Fleetwood had run with the wild horses—until he had been captured. He had broken in Fleetwood himself, though "broken" wasn't a term he used. A station rule was that none of the horses was to be treated roughly. Only recently he had to let an otherwise good stockman go because of the man's cruel streak.

Over the years he had developed a very different technique from the "breaking" favoured even in his father's day. No spurs, no whips. He didn't so much "whisper" a wild horse into tameness, though it helped. His method was the rope, while keeping constant eye contact with whatever horse he was working. He'd got that eye contact down to a fine art.

Fleetwood had thoroughbred blood in him. His dam was a runaway station mare, and the sire was probably Warri, a big rogue brumby stallion with an impressive harem.

Wild horses were part of the Outback's unique heritage, though the downside was that they did threaten the delicate ecosystems. But out here man and wild horses lived side by side, with properly schooled brumbies replenishing dwindling station stock. Once most of the cleanskins were in, they would start trapping a mob or two. The mobs were coming in from the hill country, in search of water. There were thousands of wild horses out there—many the progeny of good station blood-stock, but others too small or too scrappy to be put to any

use.

Gently he swung Fleetwood away from the line of billabongs and up onto the vast open plain. It was thickly dotted with spinifex, golden as wheat. It had been a day of stifling heat, always a big problem. The heat made men, horses and cattle sluggish, which meant all three got careless and under-performed, but he had decided the cattle from the outer areas of the station had to be brought in without delay. The heat wasn't going to get better. No use hoping or praying for a storm—although some of the storm-like displays of late had been pretty spectacular, blazing Technicolor versions of an atomic bomb. But, for all the pyrotechnics, there was no rain. The rain gods just weren't answering these days, and when they did he was pretty certain drought would give way to flood. That meant the cleanskins that had been enjoying the good life, undisturbed by man, had to be mustered and branded. With vast unfenced stations, and cattle wandering miles into the desert, the duffing of cleanskins went on.

Pretty much most of the day had been spent trying to muster a big mob of seriously psycho cattle out of Ulahrii, one of the least accessible lignum swamps. At least they'd been compensated by a brief visual delight: Ulahrii had been alight with the most beautiful and fragrant water lilies, great creamy yellow ones that lifted their gorgeous heads clear of the dark green water. He had come upon them in all their beauty, and vivid memories had caused him to suck in his breath.

Tori on her sixteenth birthday. He couldn't get a picture of her out of his mind. A group of them had been swimming in Silver Lake, and Tori had balanced a blue lotus water lily on her rosy head. To him, she had been the very picture of an exquisite water sprite, with her long sensuous hair, her extraordinary alabaster skin that never freckled, the beautiful slanting green eyes, even her little pointy ears. He thought if he could paint he would paint her as that—*Nymph of the Lagoon*, watching over the water lilies.

Tori.

She had been so vivid, so totally happy that day—a creature of light from some magical place. One way or another she was always in his mind, though she didn't come willingly to the station any more. Over four years now since their drastic falling out, but in that time he had at least held control over her life. That was until she was twenty-five, when she would come into her inheritance.

He had come into his own inheritance a whole lot earlier than anyone in the family had ever anticipated in their wildest dreams. Two years ago Brandt, his charismatic father, had pole-axed them all by abdicating his role of Master of Mallarinka and the Rushford cattle empire to hare off to South Africa, still very rich, to be with a young South African woman he had met on a visit to Darwin

and fallen passionately in love with, literally overnight. This at the age of fifty-five. These days his father and his new wife owned and ran an up-market safari camp that catered to well-heeled international tourists looking for a bit of excitement.

His mother hadn't mourned.

"I gave the best years of my life to your father. Now I'm going to pursue a bit of happiness myself."

The trouble was, the steam had gone out of his parents' largely arranged marriage by the time he had left for boarding school at age ten. His mother, a pragmatic woman, had moved on with a vengeance. She, too, had remarried, in the process acquiring a stepson—a wealthy management stockbroker with an investment bank, like his high-profile father—adding to her own family of himself and his younger sister Kerri. His mother now spent her time between Melbourne and Mellarinka, visiting in Melbourne's cold winter.

His very glamorous sister Kerri's marriage was going through a bad patch. Kerri, like their mother, was a bit of a control freak. She had asked if she could visit, and bring a friend—Marcy Hancock. Of course he had said yes, though he had grave misgivings about letting Marcy come. Sometimes he thought Marcy would still be pursuing him when they were both geriatric, or at the very least middle-aged. It was a mind-set. Nothing more. He'd have to start praying some rich Melbourne guy would whisk her off. He'd need to be rich. Marcy Hancock wasn't cut out for normal life in the suburbs.

He rode on, grateful the home compound was coming closer and closer. From time to time he lifted his head to watch the thousands of birds that had been conserving their energy all day head into the swamps and lagoons. Every species of waterbird was among them—geese, ducks, herons, egrets, ibises, blue cranes—and budgies in their billowing iridescent squadrons. There were literally millions of birds on the station. The birds on Mellarinka were doing it lean, like the rest of the desert fauna, but so far they were sticking to their territory. Mellarinka had permanent water, and a few of the larger billabongs, like Bahloo, were still quite deep.

Even at this hour, with the imperious sun losing its heat, the mirage was still abroad. It shimmered across the infinity of desert landscape, creating the most tantalising illusions of distant oases. He readily understood how early explorers responding to those illusions had come to grief. Aboriginal tribes on walkabout could have communicated to them in some way that the inland sea belonged to the Dreamtime, but the aborigines then had been very wary of the white man—and with good reason. Today only goodwill existed on Mellarinka. It would have been impossible to work the station without aboriginal stockmen. They were

marvellous bushmen, uncanny trackers and accomplished cattlemen.

He loved his desert home, but he had to admit there was a wild, dark side to it. Man was never in control. Nature was boss. He could only hope to manage his great inheritance and live in harmony with all that stupendous raw power.

The western sky, one moment all aflame was now turning sullen, silver and black shot with a livid green, and the “rain” clouds banked low over the horizon. It would be dark before he arrived. Pip, his great-aunt, would be there. Philippa had long since retired from academic life, and she was staying with him for a month or two. Whatever she liked. He left it up to her. Pip was always entertaining company and he was very fond of her.

“I’m sorry, my dear, but Lucy’s having a bit of trouble in Sydney.” Philippa was there to greet him the moment he stepped in the back door.

Instantly his heart and head sprang to Tori. He searched Pip’s long, distinguished face for clues. “It’s Tori, of course?” he groaned, removing his riding boots and shoving them inside the wet room door. ‘Just tell me she’s all right?’ Muscles of anxiety were knotting in his stomach. He was never free of worry where Tori was concerned. Probably doomed to worry about her for as long as he lived. “She hasn’t been involved in any accident?”

“No, dear.” Philippa hastened to offer reassurance. “Well, not personally. No one was hurt.”

“That’s all right, then,” he responded, his relief apparent. “Just let me have a quick shower. I’m beat. I can’t listen to another thing until then. As long as she’s all right. And, oh, I’d love a long cold beer.”

Philippa laughed. “No problem. I’ll join you in a bath-sized G&T.” She wasn’t kidding either.

Under ten minutes later, Haddo was downstairs again, visibly refreshed. Despite his back-breaking day, his whole being radiated an enormous energy other people saw but he was largely unaware of. He sank into a comfortable armchair, watching Philippa pour him a beer, before making herself a gin and tonic that would knock a lesser woman out.

“God, you’re a handsome man!” Philippa remarked with satisfaction, taking an armchair opposite.

Seeing her great-nephew gave Philippa back something of her wonderful brother Quentin—Haddo’s late grandfather. There was the same vitality, and the height, the lean powerful body, the finely sculpted features, the flash of those startlingly blue eyes. And, just to top it off, there was the *smile*—so wonderfully engaging, with fine white teeth contrasting with the dark tan of his skin. Quentin had looked just like Haddo in his youth. Haddo would look like Quentin in old age.

Haddo was smiling crookedly at her. "Let's face it, Pip. We Rushfords are a handsome lot," he joked.

"Yes, isn't it wonderful?" Philippa agreed, then abruptly sobered. "Brandt would still be here if he weren't so handsome and virile."

"He's happy, Pip." Haddo sighed. He missed his larger-than-life father. "Dad's having a whale of a time."

"So he says. I wouldn't be in the least surprised if we get word one of these days that the gel is pregnant."

"I dare say as she's half Dad's age she would want a child." Haddo's answer was reasonable. "Anyway, good luck to them. My heritage is entailed. The Rushford cattle empire remains in my hands until it passes to my son."

"Then you'd better get a move on, dear," Philippa suggested slyly. She knew who she had in mind for her darling Haddo.

"I've got to find a woman to love before I can make a commitment, Pip," he responded, in an off-hand way. "I don't want to be like Dad. I want my marriage to work."

Philippa frowned. "I'm sure Brandt wanted his marriage to work as well. But that South African hussy had him in her sights the moment she laid eyes on him. Bessie Butler told me that. The trouble was, your parents weren't really in love when they married. Not a grand passion anyway. It was all stitched up between the families—the Rushfords and the Haddons. I suppose you could almost say it was a business deal."

Haddo knew the family history. "No wonder Dad craved a bit of adventure, then," he said laconically. "Anyway, it's Tori I want to hear about. So fire away." He downed half his beer at a gulp.

"Poor old Lucy has finally mastered sending an e-mail," Philippa commented.

"That's nice!"

"There are several on your desk in the study. All saying much the same thing. She must have expected you to hit reply on the spot."

"Well, I suppose I'll be doing that shortly," he answered dryly. "All about Tori, of course?"

Philippa nodded her thickly thatched platinum head. In her late seventies, she was a remarkably well-preserved woman: very active, mentally and physically. A fine horsewoman, she still rode out every day. "How I wish Michael had never died! Probably planned it, with Livinia for a wife," she added waspishly.

"Except it wouldn't have felt right. Nothing in this world would have parted Michael from his only love—his daughter."

Philippa sighed deeply. “I know that, dear. I was just making a sick joke. The proverbial cat would have been a better mother than Livinia.”

“Agreed. So, what’s Tori done this time?” he asked. “God knows how she’s missed out on spending a night in the cells.”

“Darling girl!” Philippa murmured fondly.

“Little firebrand,” Haddo tacked on tersely.

“She’s by no means the wild-child the media like to make out,” Philippa spoke up loyally.

“You must be the only one in the family not to agree with them, Pip. I know how protective you are of her—”

“And you’re *not*?” Philippa’s eyebrows met up with her hairline.

“I have to be—as you well know. Don’t—and I mean *don’t*—tell me it’s anything to do with drugs?”

“Absolutely not, dear.” Philippa looked shocked. “Tori swore to me she would never touch them.”

“And how true is that?” he asked tersely. “They’re all around her. She’s out every night of the week. Wild parties at the weekend. Always with a posse of press in hot pursuit. And that boyfriend of hers—Morcombe.”

“Ah, but it’s Josh Morcombe who spent the night in the cells,” Philippa now informed him. “Driving under the influence, I’m afraid,” she said ruefully. “Unfortunately Tori happened to be in the car with him. That guaranteed a lot of coverage. A couple of their friends were in the back. They’d all been at some nightclub. Anyway, Josh isn’t a proper boyfriend, Haddo. She’s broken up with him. I believe her latest boyfriend doesn’t have two beans to rub together. Tori has never cared about money.”

His laugh was short. “Why would she? She’s never been without it. So that’s the latest misadventure? She was in a car with Morcombe?”

Philippa took a good swig of her drink. “Nothing happened to Tori. I suppose the police gave them all a talking-to.”

“I should damned well think so,” he said shortly. “She can’t continue like this.”

“No, she can’t,” Philippa agreed. “She’s so ferociously bright, that’s the thing!”

“She never finished her degree.”

“And she was doing so well.”

“She’s never held down a job. We know she’s clever, but she should be making something of herself—not leading this mindless life that can only get her into big trouble.”

“Can I tell you, dear, why she didn’t finish her degree?” Philippa interrupted

gently.

“Pip, I already know. Tori can’t put her perfectly good mind to anything.”

“Some of the other students—”

“Not the boys?” he jeered.

“Well, no, not the boys. The male of the species loves her. But some of the girls gave her a hard time. She had her hangers-on, of course, but some of the young women who were jealous of her beauty and brains, spread some pretty nasty rumours behind her back. No substance in them, of course. Envy is one of the deadly sins, after all.”

“So she quit uni,” Haddo said, his expression still severe, “and probably hasn’t read a book since. You still haven’t told me what Lucinda expects me to do. Though I’m no stranger to her pleas for help. There was never any hope of a quiet life with Tori. She’s on a quest to pour as much questionable experience into her young life as humanly possible.”

Philippa sighed. “Lucy loves Tori dearly, I know, but she’s an ineffectual sort of person.”

“That’s because she’s always had everything done for her,” Haddo replied. “But on the plus side, Lucinda is a good woman—and she *is* Tori’s grandmother. Tori wasn’t safe with that sleazy Barry around.”

Philippa pulled a fastidious face. “Livinia has made a career out of marrying the wrong people. Tori still believes it was her grandmother who brought pressure on Livinia to let her go.”

“Let’s keep it that way,” Haddo said. “I don’t want her to know it was me. Does Lucinda want me to go to Sydney to read *Tori the Riot Act*? ”

“Reading between the lines, I’d say Lucy wants you to bring Tori back here. Personally, I think it’s a great idea. It will keep her out of harm’s way, and allow any adverse publicity to die down. You can give the dear girl a job.”

Haddo’s laugh was short. “That’s the thing missing in Tori’s life,” he said dryly. “A job.”

“So there you are. You’re the boss. Give her one. You were bred for being the boss, Haddo dear. Nothing comes easier.”

Haddo’s chiselled mouth compressed. “Don’t mention *easy* and *Tori* in the same breath. Actually, there is something she could do,” he said musingly. But he was not sure it would work. It would certainly help them all out if it did, but he didn’t know what Tori would think about becoming schoolmarm to more than a dozen station kids, plus the really little people—the four-year-olds.

“I know.” Philippa aware of everything that went on at the station, read his mind. “She can take over from Tracey.” Mellarinka being so isolated had its own one-teacher school. Tracey Bryant was the teacher in residence, and had been for

the past two years.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Haddo said.

“At least until Tracey is over her morning sickness and the pregnancy is well established.” Philippa regarded him with a pleased expression. Tracey was now the wife of Mellarinka’s leading hand, Jim Bryant. Hired as a teacher for the station school, she had fallen in love with the very attractive Jim and quickly snaffled him up. Her first pregnancy, sadly, had ended in a miscarriage.

“Tori might have other ideas,” Haddo said. “But it’ll be a real coup getting her out here.”

“Yep—well, you’re the man to do it,” Philippa replied with conviction.

The study was in darkness. Haddo flicked a switch, flooding a room that was larger than most people’s libraries with light. A portrait of his greatly loved grandfather, Quentin, dominated the wall behind the massive partner’s desk. This was a man’s study, the furnishings and décor very much in the style of a gentleman’s club. His grandfather had called it his inner sanctum, but he had always allowed him into it, even as a small child. Floor-to-ceiling glass-fronted mahogany cabinets housed books and trophies of all kinds, countless silver cups, ribbons, awards, photographs of family with famous guests at the station. A magnificent gilded bronze horse stood on a tall plinth in front of a glass panel that had been cut out of the wall. By daylight it gave a view of the garden and two splendid date palms planted by an Afghani trader in the late 1880s.

There were two photographs of Tori on the desk. He had put them there himself. One had been taken when she was about twelve, mounted on a horse much too big for her, the other by a professional photographer on the morning of her sixteenth birthday. Her enchanting smiling face looked out at him, vibrant with life. That was before the day had gone to hell.

Abruptly he picked up the three or four e-mails Lucinda had sent. Pip had printed them off and put them in order, securing them with a paperclip. They all said roughly the same thing: Lucinda was desperately worried about her granddaughter, especially the crowd she was mixing with currently. Most of them were years older. Tori—unfortunately—had moved out of her own age group. Lucinda fully appreciated he was “an extremely busy man”, but she wouldn’t ask if she didn’t believe the situation called for his active intervention. Tori only listened to him anyway.

That was news to him.

It wasn’t possible to get away until the end of the week. He would let Lucinda know he would be arriving the coming Saturday. They could have a

good talk then.

The beautiful Rushford heiress, of all people, an Outback schoolmarm. The thought gave him a wry laugh.

Sydney, Capital of New South Wales

Tori had spent the afternoon at the shelter for which she was a silent patron. She had a few other pet projects—breast cancer research was high up on the list; she had had no idea a woman could contract the disease so *young*—but she always insisted her philanthropy be kept strictly private. So far her requests had been honoured. Whenever she visited the shelter she always wore a dark wig and a headscarf tied pirate fashion. Her long red hair was a dead giveaway. To aid anonymity she dressed Gothic, black from head to toe, with the obligatory black boots on her feet. She thought she looked suitably disguised, but despite the less than flattering gear, her natural beauty shone through.

The mother of one of her girlfriends, Tiffany, had focused her interest on the shelter. Tiffany's million-a-year barrister father—street angel, home devil—regularly beat up on Tiffany's mother. Never in places that showed. Incredibly, Tiffany's mother, a beautiful woman, bore the abuse in silence, full of shame, until her teenage son Luke had, one momentous night, threatened to kill his father if he didn't stop. Right there and then. The threat had come as a rude shock, and mercifully had worked. Luke's father had picked up on the avenging light in his son's eyes—and on the golf iron in his son's strong young hands. So it had been Tiffany's mother who had told her about the women's shelter on Wyndham Street, and the good work they did. Tori had become a patron first day out.

Her visit to the shelter, talking to the women and children there who lived in constant fear, only served to draw attention to the extravagant harbourside party that was now going on all around her. All the bigwigs and the high rollers were there, and the so-called celebrities who always appeared in the society pages—she was one of them—anyone, in fact, on the Rich List. Getting on the bandwagon had to be one of the most stupid things she had ever done. But she had been so caught up in it, it was near impossible to get off.

It was only halfway through the evening, yet already she was fed up. What was wrong with her all of a sudden? The truth was, she wasn't really a party girl—though she didn't expect anyone to believe her. You could say an accident of birth—being an heiress and all—had brought her to a place where she didn't really belong. What she really wanted...*really* wanted...

Time you grew up, Tori. You ain't gonna get it.

God, that music was *loud*. She felt like finding her hosts and lodging a complaint. She could feel her head pounding. The evening had been doomed from the start.

She looked towards the spacious entrance hall.

“Vicki—a dance?”

This was an offer she could well refuse. “No, thanks, Tim.”

“Come on, babe, I insist!” Tim, the airhead son of one of the state’s biggest developers, clicked his fingers energetically.

“Not now.” She waved Tim off, ducking and weaving through the crush of people. There had to be at least a thousand!

A moment more and she came to a dead halt. Shock poured into her. At first she thought she might be hallucinating. It wasn’t possible. Maybe she was dazed by the events of the day? Before the shelter she had attended a very boring charity breakfast and fashion parade, then she had talked with Trish Harvey, the editor of a top magazine, who was trying to persuade her into a fashion shoot. Hallucinating was ruled out! She kept religiously to her vow never to touch drugs when dope was all around her. She had, however, tossed back a couple of non-lethal cocktails when she’d arrived, just to get in the mood. The rest of the time she had drunk club soda. She felt stone-cold sober, yet she was in the middle of a surreal experience.

She blinked hard. The vision didn’t go away. It became even clearer.

Across the jam-packed room, filled with laughing, drinking, gyrating partygoers, was Haddo—in the flesh. It didn’t seem possible. How could he possibly be here? Yet there he was, standing head and shoulders above everyone else, a man who instantly commanded attention. Mimi Holland the pop star was trying to hit on him—what girl wouldn’t?—but his astonishing blue gaze was moving like a searchlight over the crowd. She knew who he was looking for.

Her.

Would you believe it? She nearly lay down and cried. There was only one explanation. Nan must have sent for him. She had to do something. Like scream! Only screaming was too tame an option, considering how agitated she felt. Hastily she tugged at the hem of her silver mini-skirt. Wrong place. Wrong clothes. It would always be that way with Haddo. She tried to lose herself in the swirling crowd, flopping one side of her long hair over her eye. It wasn’t a perfect disguise, like her Goth, but it would have to do.

“Come on, Vicki, dance with me?” Another guy surged towards her, looking half stoned, but she briskly waved him off, wedging herself up against a soaring indoor plant. To no avail.

“Tori!”

Instantly she was thrown back to her old weakness. Haddo was there, looking down at her, his blue eyes taking in the hair-style—she had had her riotous mane straightened for the night—the itsy-bitsy sparkly dress, the silver stilettos. “It wasn’t at all hard to spot you,” he said dryly, then, as adroitly as if he were cutting out a cute little poddy calf, he manoeuvred her into a relatively quiet nook.

“Haddo!” she retorted with feigned delight, regardless of her gut-churning emotions.

It hurt to see him. Really *hurt*. Once she would have walked on her hands for Haddo. He looked great. Right up there with the all-time hunks, and a very snappy dresser even when casual. His black tee was top quality, so were the black jeans, and the super bomber jacket in sexy, supple bronze Italian leather worn over them must have cost a mint. The breeze off the Harbour had tousled his hair, so a crow-black lock fell onto his tanned forehead. The back of his hair curled up enticingly at his nape. His blazing blue eyes sparkled. Was there ever such a great combination as crow-black hair and intensely blue eyes?

“Had no trouble finding me?” she queried. “You couldn’t have, since you’re here.”

He smiled down at her, in that super self-assured way he had. “Isn’t there something dangerous about wearing your hair like that?” he asked with seeming concern. “You could bump into something.”

She wanted to stomp off. Instead she tossed back the offending curtain of hair. “How did you get here?”

“The Rolls. What else?” He stared about him with an expression bordering on wonderment.

“Brody bring you?” Brody was her grandmother’s long-time major-domo and chauffeur. His wife, Dawn, was the housekeeper and cook—a very good one.

“Having someone else drive me brings me out in a cold sweat,” he mocked.

“You could have walked, or even hitch-hiked,” she pointed out with sarcasm, still trying to get the dizzies under control. “It’s not all that far away.”

“I was just too anxious to see you.” His glance dipped to her long slender legs. “Where does that dress disappear to when you sit down?” he asked, as if he really wanted to know.

“God, you’re so old-fashioned, Haddo!” she said shortly, close to despair. “You should take in the bright lights more often.”

He shrugged a careless shoulder. “I wouldn’t live in the city for a cool million.”

“And this is a guy who’s worth—what?” she jeered.

“More than you, anyway. But enough of the repartee. I’ve come to escort you home, Victoria, if you’d be so kind as to come without making a scene. Your grandmother has become very worried about you of late.”

That incensed her. “She has no need to be,” she said loftily.

“Not even *you* believe that.” He chopped her off. “I had a quick glance through the newspapers Lucinda showed me. They said some pretty mean things about you and your crowd.”

“So what?” She flushed hotly. “It’s all envy-driven. I found out early that envy is a terrible thing. Just about everyone who writes negative things about me suffers from the sin of envy.”

“I must be one who doesn’t.”

“Well, I always did bring out the best in you.”

Their fairly crackling exchange was cut short as a young man wearing round glasses suddenly appeared at Tori’s shoulder. “Vicki, sweetheart! How lovely to see you. Kiss, kiss.” He moved right in close, planting kisses European style on Tori’s cheeks. “You’ve no idea how I’ve missed you. I see Josh landed himself in a bit of trouble. I warned you about him, didn’t I?”

“All the time,” said Tori.

“And this is?” The young man, Peter Weaver, stared up at Haddo, who was dwarfing him, with interest. Peter had never seen the big guy before. Mighty impressive—even if Vicki wasn’t looking at him exactly *lovingly*.

“My cousin Haddon—Haddon Rushford,” Tori said, curling her fingers around Peter’s arm. “Haddo, this is Peter Weaver.”

“Now I get it! The cattle baron!” Peter went to slap Haddo on the back, but stopped himself just in time. The cattle baron didn’t look the type of guy one slapped on the back. “What brings you to Sydney, Haddon?” Peter asked, slipping an arm around Vicki’s tiny waist instead.

“Business, Peter,” Haddo answered. “Actually, I’m here to collect Tori. Her grandmother isn’t feeling particularly well. She wants Tori home.”

“Oh, no!” Peter moaned. “I’ve just got here. Took me half an hour to get through the door with all these people. Say, Haddon, do you know just how many women are eyeballing you?”

“He’s used to it,” Tori answered, sounding disgusted.

“Could you make it a half-hour?” Peter pleaded. “Come on, Haddon, relax. I wanna dance with Vicki.”

“I’m sure you’ll find another dancing partner, Peter,” Haddo said pleasantly, taking Tori’s slender arm. “Tori always puts her grandmother first. It’s one of the reasons we all love her to bits.”

Peter realised immediately his pleas would do no good at all. The cattle baron meant what he said. "Night, Vicki!" Peter called mournfully, watching the crowd automatically fall back to make a path for the big guy. There were lots of men in the room multimillionaires—his own dad was one—but none had Rushford's presence. He supposed it was the man-of-action stuff, the hero figure. Peter spent a fortune on fake tan. Rushford's was *real*. Good thing he was Vicki's *cousin*. Honestly, no other guy would be in any race with the cattle baron for a rival.

"Why am I supposed to do what you tell me?" Tori asked wrathfully, aware of Haddo's impact on the room and not liking it one bit.

"Leaving early, Vicki?" Mimi Holland separated herself from the crowd, lamenting. She was unable to take her eyes off the drop-dead gorgeous man with the skinny heiress. Who *was* he? From the expression on Vicki's face, he was no fun at all—gorgeous as he was. Mimi didn't believe that for a moment. This was a seriously sexy guy. God, she should have found out his name.

"That was Mimi Holland," Tori told Haddo sharply.

He nodded. "I believe we met briefly."

"You're not normal at all, are you? Most guys would leap at the chance of hooking up with Mimi."

"Really?" Haddo sounded dubious. "You can't enjoy this sort of thing, surely?" he asked, looking at the couples dancing with single-minded abandon, some of them kissing, others looking as if they urgently needed a private room.

"Again, most people would kill for an invitation."

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Wouldn't they be better off working out at a gym?"

"Funny," she said tartly. "I have to say goodnight to my hosts."

"Of course you do. Good manners get one smoothly through life. I'll come with you. I just can't imagine how your hosts got to be so notorious, can you?"

They were moving out into the star-spangled night when Haddo suddenly said, "Where's your coat? It's cold with the breeze off the water."

"I don't feel it," she said briskly, trying to sound as tough as nails. She had been driven right up to the door in an air-conditioned Rolls. She hadn't wanted a top coat to spoil her appearance.

"Oh, for God's sake, Tori." He tutted. "You never used to be so vain." He stripped off his leather jacket and held it cape-like for her to slip on.

"I don't want that," she said, almost fearfully, as though to wear something of his would be dangerous.

“Put it on.”

No mistaking that for an order. She did as she was told. His jacket enveloped her, and then some. How foolish she had been to accept it. Instantly the warmth of his body hit her, rocking her to her wounded heart. His male scent was so familiar it gave her the most piercing sensation of intimacy. Her limbs lost their strength. It always happened when she and Haddo were together. Why *was* that? She had the dismal notion she was about to topple over. To counteract the peculiar feeling she slowed her steps, uncharacteristically awkward in her silver stilettos.

He took her arm, steadyng her. “You’re lost in that.”

“I only put it on to make you happy,” she replied ungraciously. “So where is it?” She stared about the light-bathed drive.

“The Rolls?”

“What else? Unless you’ve organised a horse and carriage?”

“It’s out in the street. There was no room here.” The drive was packed with luxury cars.

“Then you’d better take a peek outside,” she advised. “There’s bound to be a photographer hanging around.”

He glanced down at her. “So you’re going to slip the jacket off? Is that it? Strut your stuff?”

“I’m going to do no such thing,” she said huffily, trying without success to pull away.

They were out on the tree-lined avenue and, just as she had predicted, a man with a camera—Tori recognised him as one of the usual gang—began to move swiftly towards them.

Tori snuggled deeper into Haddo’s jacket. It had become her igloo, shielding her from the chill wind and from plain sight. “Why is it always a man?” she muttered. “I’ve never laid eyes on a woman photographer yet. It’s all men shoving a camera in your face.”

“You can’t blame them, though. The public devours this sort of stuff.” Haddo’s tone lifted a few notches. It was a voice long used to being obeyed. “No photographs, pal.” He spoke in an unfrontational way, yet a stone-deaf man would have got the message.

The photographer gave a conciliatory chuckle. “Who’s the little lady you’re hiding there? It’s not one of the celebs, is it? Or maybe it’s our own little home-grown heiress?”

“Just do what I tell you,” Haddo returned crisply. “Move out of the way, pal.”

“Hey!”

Her head withdrawn like a tortoise, Tori heard the photographer cry out. Agitated, she parted the leather jacket and peered out. The photographer would be no match for Haddo. In fact he was reeling away. Surely Haddo hadn't hit him?

"I don't like cameras being shoved in my face," Haddo was saying, almost pleasantly. "Don't worry. I'm not going to damage it. I'll give it back to you the moment we're on our way."

The photographer didn't answer. He simply followed in their wake.

"It's astonishing how people pay attention when you're six-feet-three," Tori commented as they drove off. The photographer was now busily snapping away at whatever images he could get: the back of her grandmother's Rolls, the number plate.

Haddo didn't answer for a minute or two. Then, "What the hell is happening to you, Tori?" he asked, in a dead serious voice.

Here it comes—the lecture! She averted her head, staring out of the window at the star-spangled night. "Isn't it obvious? I'm being kidnapped. Getting photographed goes with the territory, Haddo. Those guys get paid for their pictures. Sometimes it's quite a lot of money. I don't need to tell you that."

"And it's you they seem to want to see."

She blushed hotly. "Hey, they won't want to see me when I'm old."

"If you *get* to be old," he rasped. "That's one of the reasons I'm here. I told you, your grandmother showed me all those newspaper clippings about Morcombe's driving under the influence. The reason it got so much coverage was *you*. It can't go on like this, Tori. I won't have it. Rushford has been a well-respected name in this country since the early days of settlement."

She positively hated him then. "So what do you want me to do? Sing the National Anthem? Isn't it wonderful the Rushfords are so unquestionably top drawer? You must have hated it when your dad blotted his copybook, running off with that Aleesha, or whatever her name is."

"I don't want or need your opinion about that, Tori," he said shortly. "And it's Shona who is now his wife."

"Shona, then. Pardon me. Of course you don't want to talk about your dad. You'd rather talk about me, and how totally immature I am."

"Are you trying to tell me you're adult?" he asked scathingly.

It was like a very hard slap. She swallowed hard. "I'll never be adult enough for you, Haddo." Wasn't that the stark truth?

He flicked a glance over her small, mutinous face. "The reason I'm in Sydney, Tori, is because your grandmother asked me to come. We've had a long discussion, and the upshot is I'm going to take you back to Mallarinka with me.

Once there, I intend to put you to work.”

That piece of news positively galvanised her. She swung her head, aghast. “I’m an heiress,” she protested strongly. “I don’t *need* to work.”

“We’re all supposed to work,” he said, in a bracing type of voice. “Work won’t kill you.”

“And you’ll be my boss?” The very thought sent jolts of rebellion through her.

“Don’t sound so shocked. Who else?”

She clenched her long, beautifully manicured fingers in her lap. “I’d be a lot happier working for some *other* dictator. So what have you got in mind for me?” she asked grimly. “Even supposing I’ll go.”

“Oh, you’ll go, all right.” His tone deepened.

“Where does it say I have to obey you?”

He shot her a brief glance, one black eyebrow up. “Actually, there’s a file about a hundred pages long. “

“You just wait until I’m twenty-five,” she said, gritting her small teeth.

“I can’t wait, actually. Until then I’m not quitting on you. I’m the boss. You’ll do what I say.”

“Beast.”

His handsome mouth was amused. “I don’t have to be. Just do what I tell you and everything will be okay.”

“So what do you have in mind?” she asked, her voice dripping sarcasm. “Housework? General maintenance? Camp cook? I can’t make a damper, and I’m rarely invited into a kitchen. Or do you intend to take me on as a jillaroo? I’d need to polish up my skills for that.”

He sighed. It sounded quite genuine. “Don’t you feel you really should have finished your education? There’s still plenty of time. Anyway, I have decided on a job for you.” Smoothly he overtook a slow-moving car. The young driver saluted them, obviously in fun.

“To hell with that!” she growled. “This is silly. I’m not going *anywhere* with you. Damned if I am.”

“Oh, yes, you are.” His striking face in the light of the dash indicated he didn’t expect nor would he tolerate disobedience. “Or I’ll definitely cut your allowance. Big-time.”

She shook her head, infuriated, blinking back hot tears. “And you’re just miserable enough to do it. It’s all for my own good, of course.”

He glanced at her. His jacket all but swallowed her up. “Your well-being is very important to me, Tori.”

She snorted in disgust. “You really expect me to believe that?” At the very

least he should feel guilty he had broken her heart.

"Well, it's true," he answered quietly. "And you *want* to believe it, I think, deep down."

"No way," she scoffed. "So, what is this little job? And just how long am I supposed to endure detention?"

He flashed her just a glimpse of his marvellous smile. "For as long as it takes, Victoria."

"But that's blackmail!" she gasped. "It's a violation of my human rights. Listen to me, Haddo." She twisted her body in the seat, staring at his chiselled profile. "I need a time-frame here. A month, two, six months, and you'll pay me to go away. Put it this way. I don't much mind going back to Mellarinka. But, unless you've forgotten, I've become addicted to hating you."

"Now, that's just plain childish," he said. "A childish passion. I think what you actually mean is you're addicted to *pretending* you hate me."

"You—are—so—bloody arrogant," she muttered. She couldn't handle Haddo at all. She just wasn't equipped.

"Play it cool, now, Tori," he advised.

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"God!" she moaned, hugging herself beneath his jacket and toiling away at keeping angry. "Okay—let me have it? What's the job? If you think I'm going to clean all those blasted chandeliers or all that silver you've got another think coming. I wouldn't mind working in the office an hour or so a day. But the rest of the time I want off. I mightn't love you any more, but I do love Mellarinka."

"Well, obviously you'll be given time off. That's only fair. But I expect you to do a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. I *will* pay you."

"If you feel you have to," she said, bittersweet. "Gee, just think! I had all these parties and functions lined up. Instead, I'll be doing—what? You're being very coy."

"You'll be taking over the station school from Tracey Bryant," Haddo announced.

"You're joking!" she cried, appalled. "You're having me on, aren't you?"

"On the contrary. I'm dead serious."

"So what's wrong with Tracey?" she burst out jerkily. "I thought she loved it?"

"Tracey is pregnant."

"Ah, *lovely!*" She softened at the news. "Better luck this time."

"And not at this stage terribly well."

"Ooh!"

“Will you stop oohing and aahing?” he said crisply. “She’s okay. She’s going to stay with her sister in Warwick for a while. I had been considering hiring a replacement until Tracey is ready to come back to the job—she will be given adequate maternity leave—but out of the blue you’ve been delivered to me on a silver platter.”

“If you’re trying to make me angry, you’re succeeding.”

“I’m not trying to make you angry at all.”

“You only have to look at me to make me angry,” she fumed.

“I realise that.” There was a slight hardness in his tone. “Anyway, to get back to your job. I won’t say you’re *perfect* for it—you might be tempted to play hookey with the kids—but I think you can manage. What do you say?”

“Hire that replacement.”

“Okay, I can do that. If you don’t like the idea of being schoolmarm to a bunch of kids, there’s always the station store. The hours aren’t as good. Nine to five as opposed to nine to three.”

She looked towards him, a sigh rippling up from her throat. “Haddo, you know perfectly well I have no training whatsoever for teaching kids,” she said tightly.

“You completed two years of your arts degree,” he pointed out. “You were a straight A student. I think you could manage it if you brushed up a bit.”

She groaned. “What about the little kids? The really *little* kids? That’s childminding.”

“Take it or leave it,” he clipped out. “But believe me, you’ll be on Mellarinka to do a job of work.”

Her emerald eyes flashed. “The fact you can dictate to me like that makes me want to hit you.”

He laughed heartlessly.

Ten fraught minutes later they were driving through the massive wrought-iron gates of the Rushford mansion. Inside the six-car garage, the Rolls slid into its parking bay alongside the Mercedes Lucinda used on the occasions when she drove herself, and a silver SUV that “came in handy”—Lucinda’s words. Brody and Dawn’s private vehicles, little runarounds, were parked to the left.

Immediately the Rolls stopped, Tori threw open the door and jumped out, exhaling a long pent-up breath. Relief? No, not relief. What, then? High tension? She couldn’t possibly relax around Haddo. It was a deeply complex thing beyond understanding. She had to pass him to get to the steps that led up to the house. That alone gave her the jitters. How could *any* man be so sexy? Hastily

she slipped out of his jacket and held it out to him, shaking it a little, as though if he didn't take it immediately she would drop it on the concrete. Her heart was beating awfully fast. She felt naked now, without its warmth and protection.

"What? No thanks?" he chided. "Where are your manners, Victoria?" His eyes were so brilliant and mocking they unnerved her.

"I put them away when you're around," she responded tartly.

"I haven't failed to notice. Why so jittery?"

She was endeavouring to inch by him, but he caught her arm. "For God's sake, Tori, I'm absolutely harmless."

"Not damned likely!" she shot back. She could feel the electric connection that surged between them. For her it meant intense physical attraction. God knew what it meant to him.

"Look, why don't we get this over?" he suggested.

"Get *what* over?" *Oh, oh, oh!* A gaping abyss opened up. She could feel her heart commence a slow drumroll. "I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about, Haddo," she told him sharply. Lies, all lies.

"I'm pretty sure you do," he replied. "You've been wondering since you were a kid what it would be like if I kissed you."

Her cheeks flamed. "Surely you've already done it?" she cried, affronted. "You *have* kissed me. Remember?" She lifted her chin.

"Sorry. Actually, I do recall the two of us sharing a pillow for about five seconds," he said, very dryly. "I had no option but to let you go, Tori."

"After lashing me with your tongue." The past was swirling around them like a London fog.

"It was a hellish situation. If I hurt you—"

"Ah, don't give me the *if!*" she cried scornfully. "I'm allergic to ifs."

He kept his sapphire gaze trained on her. "My suggestion is this. If only to prevent you from having a nervous breakdown every time we're thrown together, why don't we get one *last* kiss out of the way? Think of it as closure, if you like. You may well decide you don't love me any more."

"I never loved you in the first place," she said, with furious offended pride. "You're just trying to make a fool of me."

His eyes dazzled. "And you haven't given *me* a rough ride these past four years?"

"So now you're going to take me hostage? Is that it? You want to get square? You want to make me grovel?"

"How can you possibly look at it like that, Tori?" he asked with cool reason. "It's not an end-of-the-world situation. I just want to get a few things settled."

How could he do that, when *she* was becoming more and more unsettled?

"Well, that's too bad, because I'm not ready to settle anything. I'm going upstairs." She tried to speak firmly, only the quiver in her voice let her down.

"We'll both go up in a minute," he promised. "This won't take long."

Despite his casual manner, she could see the sizzling intensity in his eyes.

"Haddo, no!" She threw up a hand, bracing herself for the inevitable avalanche of sensation.

He could see the panic in her eyes. "Come here to me," he said gently.

The odd tenderness in his voice played hell with her mixed-up emotions.

Stick to your agenda! her inner voice warned her. *Don't let him do this to you. Where's your pride?*

The only trouble was she was in an awful emotional mess. Her brain was telling her one thing, her body another.

Her body won. It was a big lamentation in life how often that happened. Her defences, so carefully constructed over the past four years, imploded.

Give in. Give in, her poor weak woman's body cried out in anguish.

Not a peep out of her brain. She could feel the melt-down start up inside her. In one way she hated it. It gave her no peace. The tragic truth was, for all she had previously stated, she *did* love him. Damn him! She had spent sixteen years loving him. It was going to take a heck of a lot more years than four more to flush him right out of her system. No wonder she felt like sobbing. The most humiliating thing was that from his expression he knew all about the fierce battle that was going on inside her. He was right in his element, playing the dominant, irresistible male.

He drew her to him. Nothing hurried, but very sure. He turned her face up to him. "Tell me how many times you've been kissed since then," he said, looking deeply into her eyes.

Suddenly she felt the balance of power had shifted slightly her way. She gave him a look of sparkling malice. "You really want to know?"

"I do." His tone turned edgy.

She threw off a bittersweet laugh. "Hundreds and hundreds of—"

Before she could get out *times* he silenced her. His mouth came down squarely over hers, so warm, so compelling, so utterly perfect to her, it ignited a flame of physical desire. Call her weak, call her a complete fake, she still yearned for him. The bitter truth was, she was a closed case.

Everything was lost in a tide of sensation. It swamped her, carrying her under. It was a mercy he was so much taller, because she desperately needed support. Why did this happen with Haddo and no one else? Why did her legs go so weak and trembly? So, for that matter, were her arms. It was a kind of physical disintegration. She couldn't have pushed him away even if she'd

wanted to. Hers was a classic case of obsessive love. Only obsessive love never made anyone happy. She should know. People died for love. Killed for love. Some gave up *everything* for love, only to finish up with nothing but untold grief and unending heartache. Sex and love could be a fatal combination.

When he finally released her all she could manage was the single word. “God!”

When you loved someone as she loved Haddo it went on for ever, and there was no way to dislodge it.

Tremors were still racking her. Her voice was so husky she might have been coming down with a cold. “Can I go now?” she found herself near pleading.

“I’m not stopping you.”

They were in her grandmother’s garage, yet she felt as if they were sealed off from the rest of the world. She couldn’t look at him. She couldn’t allow him to search her eyes. Her eyes had always betrayed her.

He was standing very still, yet somehow he was giving the powerful impression he was about to swoop on her again and pull her into his arms. She was terrified that this time her arms would go up and lock around his neck, never to let go. Turned out she had no pride at all. The only way she had been able to carry off her role of indifference was in company. When they were alone together it was a vastly different matter.

“So? Are you going to move?” She made a truly Gallic gesture, lifting her shoulders and holding out her hands.

Haddo obliged without haste, giving her just enough room to push past him. He waited until she’d reached the bottom of the stairs before asking, “How long will it take you to pack?”

She felt liberated by the space between them. “Don’t you supply a school uniform?” she asked with sharp sarcasm.

“I thought you’d had enough of uniforms? You certainly won’t be needing anything like you’ve got on now. Or dare I say *nearly* got on?”

She swung back to him, her beautiful auburn hair in disarray, green eyes glittering, a flush enhancing her alabaster skin. “*You* mightn’t know it, but this is a *great* dress. I’m a trendsetter.”

“You mean the less you wear, the trendier you get?”

She laughed hoarsely. “Oh, go to the devil! By the way, I’m going to bring a friend with me.” The idea had presented itself to her on the instant. Her attitude defied him to object.

“You’re kidding!”

“I couldn’t be more serious.”

A warning glitter came into his eyes. “I just hope you’re not going to tell me

your friend is male?"

"Why? Would you put your foot down?" she cooed, pursing her lips provocatively.

"You bet!"

He would too. No idle threat. "My friend is female," she snapped. "And she's desperately in need of a change of scene."

"In trouble with the law, is she?" he asked dryly.

"She's quite respectable. Her name is Chrissy Graham." If anyone at the shelter needed help it was Chrissy, with her broken front tooth and her less visible broken ribs. She might leap at the chance of an Outback holiday. Then again, she mightn't. "She's a couple of years younger than I am. Maybe eighteen months."

"Let's see—that makes her barely out of school. So what's the connection?"

"She's a friend, okay?" Tori answered in some agitation, still feeling threatened.

Her whole body was thrumming with an uncontrollable excitement. She wanted to go back into his arms again. She wanted him to pry open her mouth, let the tip of his tongue slide over her teeth. He had only to touch her for her veins to turn into molten glass.

"Am I allowed to ask where Chrissy lives?" Haddo's tone was laconic.

"She lives in the inner city," she supplied, purposely vague. "She doesn't have any money. She's young, and she's struggling. She's had a chaotic life."

She didn't tell him that Chrissy, after the death of her mother, with her father unable to cope, had been put in a home at age eleven. Over the years she had been bounced from one home to the next. Set free at sixteen, in under a week flat she had fallen into the clutches of an abusive boyfriend—hence her periodic retreats to the shelter.

"I want to help her," she told Haddo defiantly. "Are you going to help *me*?" She was straining not to shout at him, but she couldn't seem to control her voice.

"If you think it's going to make your detention any easier, by all means." He lifted an arm to switch off the lights. "What is she? A guest?"

"Why are you asking?" She frowned crossly at him.

"I just thought she might require room service. You, my girl, as I said, are going to work."

"I'm not damned well useless, I'll have you know!" She flounced up the stairs, beautiful long legs very much on display. "You can find a job for Chrissy too," she threw over her shoulder.

"What can the mysterious Chrissy do? Can she ride?"

She swung about, a considering frown on her face. "I would think so. She

was born on a farm.”

“Lovely!” Haddo said with exaggerated satisfaction. “I’ll put her straight to muster work. Now, I can’t be too long away from the station. I’d like to leave the day after tomorrow. It will be an early start. I’d appreciate it if you and Chrissy could get yourselves organised by then.”

She shrugged. “I’ll never get my punishment over otherwise. Just remember,” she warned, “*I’m* the one under house arrest. Not Chrissy.”

“No need to shout at me.” He began to mount the stairs, tall commanding, insufferably sure of himself. “I can’t wait to meet her. Tell me, has she heard terrible things about me?”

“She hasn’t heard a damned thing about you,” Tori told him fiercely, reaching out to seize the door handle. He beat her to it.

“Well, that’s a relief. Allow me.” His hand was over hers: a beautiful hand, long-fingered, strong, calluses on the pads. His tone mocked her.

Tori took a deep shaky breath. At times like this it was brought home forcibly that skin was the largest organ in the body. *Skin on skin!*

Oh, God! she thought helplessly.

Try to think of it this way. Her inner voice unexpectedly came to her aid. *Love is only a four-letter word.*

But it was a magic word. That was the thing. A word so powerful it changed lives.

She burst into the house as if a stalker was close on her heels, not Haddo. “Goodnight,” she tossed at him, very fast. “I know I’ll sleep soundly knowing that was our *last* kiss.”

“How long will it remain the last, I wonder?” Haddo called after her.

She didn’t answer, but a fierce flush burned her cheeks.

CHAPTER TWO

BRODY had the job of driving them to the commercial airstrip, where the Beech Baron awaited them, but first Chrissy had to be picked up from outside the women's shelter. Tori had made a quick dash to the shelter the day before, to issue Chrissy with an invitation, not really sure whether Chrissy would accept or not. The truly bizarre thing she had learned about some of the battered women at the shelter was that husbands or partners only had to say they were sorry, they hadn't meant it, and cite pressures and stresses, for the women to pack up their few possessions and return to the same dreadful situation. Not only that, but take their poor frightened little kids with them. It was heartbreaking! But Chrissy deserved a chance. She had sworn to Tori she was going to break free—"If only he'll let me!"

When Tori had issued the invitation Chrissy had burst into tears. "God, Vicki, I don't believe this," she had sobbed, desperate to take the support offered. "No one has done anythin' for me. Ever! Not since Mum died."

Tori had wiped the mascara streaks from Chrissy's thin cheeks. "You're going to love it, Chrissy," she assured her. "And best of all you'll be safe."

Chrissy's bully of a boyfriend would be in huge trouble if he ever found out where Chrissy was and decided to follow. One could almost wish he would, just so he could be taught a lesson he would never forget. Violence against women and children occurred everywhere in the world, but not on Mallarinka. Chrissy would be safe.

As it happened, the Master of Mallarinka was now asking, "If it's not a rude question, Victoria, where exactly are we going?" Haddo was up front with Brody. Tori was in the back.

"Not far now," she said vaguely, as the Rolls proceeded on its stately progress through one of the least desirable parts of town. Gangs of adolescents at neither school nor work were standing about on street corners. A few turned to make vulgar salutes at the Rolls, accompanied by the usual look of challenge in their eyes.

"I've a feeling you haven't been straight with me," Haddo observed crisply.
"No kidding?"

"Well, if I offend you I don't give a damn. Chrissy isn't a prostitute, is she?

One with a heart of gold?"

Brody turned a laugh into a cough, while Tori said sharply. "Of course not! Chrissy is a good kid. She just needs a break."

"It's a women's shelter, isn't it?" Haddo guessed, staring out at a heavily moustachioed bald guy who looked like a movie bank robber.

"You've never seen such sad cases in your whole life," Tori lamented. "Oh, there she is!"

Up ahead Chrissy was waiting in front of the shelter, a suitcase at her feet. Tori had warned her in advance she would most probably be picking her up in a Rolls-Royce—something that had made Chrissy choke with laughter—so when she saw the Rolls approaching Chrissy began to wave a hanky very energetically.

"And that is Chrissy?" Haddo turned his head over his shoulder to enquire.

"Miss Victoria takes a real interest in the shelter," said Brody, a long time confidante, with considerable approval in his tone. "No one could say Miss Victoria is lacking in heart," he added fondly.

"You dark horse, you, Miss Victoria." Haddo's blue eyes mocked her. "You've been very careful to keep that to yourself, haven't you?"

"That's the way I am!" she retorted breezily. "I notice you don't advertise all *your* numerous acts of philanthropy either, or all your good deeds. It's a family thing. Now, let me do the talking, Haddo," she said, as Brody pulled the big car into the kerb beside Chrissy, who was almost tap dancing in excitement.

"Go right ahead," he invited nonchalantly. "It'll take me a moment to catch my breath anyway."

A beaming Chrissy awaited them, decked out in her finest. Some might have said they were extraordinary garments. Others might have mistaken her for a little bag lady. A red beanie was pulled down over brown corkscrew curls that stuck out at random. Her ears were pierced with several metal rings. She wore a fake diamond stud in her nose. Red stockings to match her beanie clothed her brolga-thin legs. A pair of substantial black boots weighted down her small feet.

The two young women, who couldn't possibly have presented a more dissimilar image, exchanged hugs while a fascinated Haddo took in Chrissy at a glance.

Just what I need, he thought. Someone else to worry about. And as for Tori? Tori was constantly surprising him. Not that she hadn't always had a tender heart. This poor little waif, who showed every sign of having had a tough life, was Tori's friend—though he thought Chrissy could look a whole lot better minus the heavy metal, dressed in decent clothes and with more weight on her. They could take care of that part of it.

It was obvious she was wildly excited, even kissing Brody, who had stepped

out of the Rolls to store her small tattered suitcase—she wasn't over-burdened with possessions—in the boot. Brody took the kiss well.

My turn! thought Haddo, detecting from long practice the look of anxiety Tori was trying to hide behind big black Gucci sunglasses.

"This is Haddo," Tori introduced him, rapid fire. *Get it over.*

Chrissy blushed scarlet and gave him a nerve-strangled, "Hello. Pleased to meet you, Haddo. Or should I call you Mr Rushford?" Haddo noticed the broken front tooth.

"Haddo will do," Tori clipped off for him.

He gave Tori a quick glance. "Well, you *did* say you'd do the talking. Nice to have you along, Chrissy," he said. That tooth had to be fixed. He filed it away for future attention. He didn't want to waste any more time, so he began to shepherd both young women into the back seat. "Better get going," he murmured to Brody as he slipped into the passenger seat. "Before someone throws a rock at the Rolls."

"Will do, sir," said Brody, surprised someone hadn't already done so.

The flight into Mellarinka was the most exciting event of Chrissy's young life. In fact it was the *only* flight Chrissy had ever taken. She had never been anywhere near a plane, much less seated in one, looking out at the white billowy clouds. It was all too fabulous! She had thought she was going to be apprehensive, but Haddo was a great pilot—and what was even more astonishing was that he flew his own plane. How cool was that? And so was *he*. Gorgeous, and such a gentleman. He treated her as if she was one of Vicki's *real* friends, instead of someone Vicki had been kind enough to rescue from a women's shelter.

Everyone at the shelter thought of Vicki as their guardian angel. Vicki had blushed when she had first heard it, and held up protesting hands.

"Listen up, ladies! You haven't got enough; I've got too much. It balances out."

Be that as it may, no other heiresses had ever stopped by. Vicki had heart.

They all knew her. Some had formed not terribly complimentary opinions—beautiful, an heiress, little asked of her, less expected, and so forth. They had seen the photographs in the newspapers and magazines. Photographers never seemed to get tired of her. And why not? She was amazingly beautiful, even when she came into the shelter dressed up in the Goth stuff and gave them all a good laugh. Nevertheless, it was just the most unlikely thing that *the Victoria Rushford* had turned up on the doorstep of the shelter wanting to help. Vicki and all of her friends were seriously rich, whereas for most of Chrissy's life she had

had to struggle just to stay alive. It gave her an enormous feeling of security to know that just being a visitor on Mellarinka meant she was free of Zack's intimidation, and the periodic beltings when he was drunk. Easy for Zack to belt *her*; she would love to see him try to swing a punch at Haddo. That was if he could even reach Haddo's chin.

They had been flying over Mellarinka for some time. Now they were on their descent, which gave Chrissy a fresh burst of pleasure. For the first time she could see the homestead and all the outbuildings. It looked so exciting, yet bizarre. Who would expect what looked like a small town to be set down smack in the middle of absolutely nowhere? Chrissy had been born on a dairy farm near the lush Queensland/New South Wales border, and it was a fantastic experience to see the *real* Outback—especially from the air.

She was stunned by the vastness, the emptiness, and most of all the riot of dry ochre colours, that flared all over the landscape: the umbers, the yellows and purples, the orange and the dominant red. No wonder this was called the Red Centre. She had never thought of the Outback as full of colour, but more usually as arid, with wide brown land stricken by drought, but there it was beneath her, awe-inspiring. She was glorying in it. The fiery red of the plains that stretched to the horizon contrasted brilliantly with the cobalt blue of the sky and the big golden bushes like giant pincushions. She supposed it was spinifex, yet it made such a gilded splash.

Mellarinka—she loved the name—meant five lagoons. Haddo had told her. To her further astonishment, the station itself looked like a miraculous green sanctuary in a million square miles of shimmering red sand. She could feel the blood tingling in her veins. It was truly breathtaking—and she had to admit frightening too. It would be perilously easy to get lost down there. She knew—every city dweller did—that the Outback was a dangerous place, especially the desert. Poorly schooled, she had nevertheless learned about the early explorers who had perished there on their ill-fated expeditions. And Mellarinka was on the great desert fringe, the legendary Channel Country—a riverine desert and the stronghold of the nation's cattle kings.

It was just so *glamorous!* Like Haddo and Vicki. They were glamorous people. Their life was so very far removed from hers they might have existed on a different planet. Yet they couldn't have been nicer. Glamour in abundance they might have, but they completely lacked what she thought of as airs and graces. It gave her a warm feeling to know she had such friends.

To the west lay a huge area of hilly country that rose from the extraordinary flatness of the plains, making them appear much higher than they were. The peaks had eroded over eons into glowing rounded minarets, rust-red in the

blazing sunlight, purple in the shadowy canyons. Beyond the wing-tip she could see a vast ocean of red sand, with towering dunes running in parallel lines for all the world like ocean waves. Closer in to the homestead there were numerous long pools of water, surrounded by trees. Those were the billabongs, and there were also the five lagoons. Excitedly she counted them. One glinted like silver foil, another was an incredible light blue, like aqua-marine, two more had an opalescent milky-green sheen.

It was unearthly, unreal!

Chrissy considered herself the luckiest girl in the world. From the first day they had met and clicked, Vicki had shown her nothing but kindness. She would have to find some way to repay her.

Philippa stood, straight as an arrow, at the front door to greet them. She extended her arms to the full and Tori went into them.

“Darling girl, I’ve missed you!” Philippa said, placing a gentle hand on Tori’s luxuriant mane of hair, including Chrissy in her warm, welcoming smile.

“I’ve missed you too, Pip.” Tori patted and rubbed her great-aunt’s thin back, all the while blinking back a few radiant tears. “I expect you know Haddo kidnapped me?”

Philippa’s face broke into a smile. “Haddo has always had your best interests at heart, dear. Anyway, it’s so lovely to have you.”

“This is my friend Chrissy, Pip.” Tori turned to introduce them.

Chrissy didn’t come unheralded—Philippa had been informed—so Chrissy too got a hug. Neither woman, young or old, faltered at going into an embrace. It was very difficult to resist Philippa who carried with her a natural air of authority that demanded deference, but a bred-in-the-bone kindness too.

“Now, what say I show you to your rooms?” Philippa said. “You can settle in, then we’ll have some afternoon tea. Haddo, dear?” she called to Haddo, who was standing on the verandah, pointing to the suitcases—all Tori’s with the exception of one—for Bert, the station handyman, to bring in. “Are you going to stay for afternoon tea?”

“Sure,” Haddo responded. “But I have to have a word with Archie first.” Archie Reed was the station overseer. “Give me about twenty minutes.”

“Right, dear. Now, come on, gels.” Philippa led the way up an imposing main staircase that had a central landing then branched off to either side. “I’ve put Chrissy across the hallway from you, Tori, so she won’t be lonely,” she explained. “It’s a big house.”

Chrissy turned saucer eyes on Tori. “It’s *humungous!*”

“Won’t take you long to get used to it,” Tori said, companionably taking Chrissy’s arm and dismissing the ancestral home of one of the great landed families of Australia.

During that first week Haddo gave both girls time to settle. Chrissy, at first clearly overawed—it was all *too* much—sat silently and very shyly at the dinner table, but gradually began to thaw under the influence of so much ease and kindness. She was getting to know the house, and becoming more used to its splendour, its size, the furnishings, and all those paintings and beautiful things. It literally took her breath away.

Tori was the same as ever, though Chrissy couldn’t help being in awe of Haddo and his status—but he was so nice to her—and Philippa was lovely. Not a bit stiff and starchy, even if she did speak like the Queen. Yet still Chrissy felt extraordinarily out of place. She sometimes thought it was like stumbling on to a movie set with beautiful rich people who lived in their own kingdom. But they had their troubles like everyone else. Tori had confided in her that she didn’t much like her life as the Rushford heiress.

“Just an accident of birth, Chrissy. You could have been the Rushford heiress.”

“Not darned likely!” Chrissy had choked on laughter.

Aware Chrissy was still feeling like a fish out of water, tactfully Tori had left the idea of supplementing—or to be truthful *changing* Chrissy’s wardrobe until the day before Kerri and her friend Marcy were due to arrive. She had seen more than enough of Marcy to know she was a terrible snob, with a gift for the throwaway insult, even among her own moneyed set. One look at Chrissy in her current gear and the knives would be out—even if they were behind Chrissy’s back. Still, Chrissy would *know* she was a source of droll disdain.

Philippa listened carefully when Tori explained. “The last thing I want to do is hurt Chrissy’s feelings, but I have so many things I can give her to wear. You know what Kerri and that awful Marcy are like.”

Philippa sighed to herself. “I certainly do. God forgive me for saying it, but I do wish they weren’t coming. Marcy will grab any opportunity to see Haddo. I’m tempted to tell her she’s been wasting her time all these years.”

“Don’t you think Haddo should be the one to tell her?” Tori asked crisply.

“I’m fairly sure Haddo hasn’t given Marcy any encouragement, dear,” Philippa assured her, veiling her eyes. “Anyway, as regards Chrissy, what harm can it do, showing her what you’ve got? She’s a good bit shorter than you, but you’re both very slender. Personally, I don’t think you’d know Chrissy with a

little bit of a makeover.”

“I want her to look her best,” Tori said. “And I’m going to get that tooth of hers fixed,” she whispered, although Chrissy was a good distance off, with Kate in the kitchen. Chrissy felt at home there, to the extent that Kate, Mellarinka’s long-time housekeeper, was giving her cooking lessons. It had been Tori’s idea, and it was a good one.

The two girls had fallen into a routine of riding in the afternoon. It hadn’t taken Chrissy long to get the hang of riding a horse again, once a nice quiet mare was found for her, and Tori worked out safe rides in advance. That afternoon they had decided on being a bit more adventurous and visiting a stock camp at Cobbi Creek. Tori knew a party of stockmen was scheduled to head off to the rough hill country, to bring back all the cattle they could muster. Haddo had mentioned it at dinner the previous night. The muster was expected to go on for several days, which meant the men had to take along extra horses—at least three or four to a man—so they could rest the others when they were ready to drop from fatigue or, as sometimes happened, when they got injured. Mustering meant physical exhaustion.

When they arrived at the camp, surrounded by a near solid wall of coolibahs, and areas of the creek packed with fragrant pink water lilies, they dismounted and left their horses tethered in the abundant shade. Tori’s eyes immediately picked out Haddo’s tall, commanding figure. He was standing outside the corral talking to Snowy, their top aboriginal stockman and tracker, who most probably would be in charge. A whole bunch of horses had already been rounded up for the trip. She counted roughly thirty. They were standing quietly inside the corral, almost at attention.

Haddo turned his head and came towards them, emanating that vibrant masculinity that was so much a part of him. He looked stunningly handsome even in his everyday riding gear, with a bright red bandanna knotted around his darkly tanned throat.

“How’s it going?” He reached them, smiling. And what a smile he had!

Chrissy responded with her own sweet smile, broken tooth or no. “Great—just great, Haddo. I’m absolutely loving this. I’m finally getting used to being back in the saddle too. My bum doesn’t hurt so much. Can you swim in this creek?”

He nodded, with a glance at the glittering water. “You could, but there are much better places to take a swim. Tori can show you.” Now his smouldering sapphire gaze slicked over Tori, who stood with a classy white akubra tilted nonchalantly over her eyes. “Hi!”

“Hi!” she responded, momentarily blinded to her surroundings. Haddo did

that to her.

"I like the way you call her Tori," Chrissy said. "Everyone else calls her Vicki."

"Well, I've been calling her Tori so long I couldn't possibly change," Haddo explained, glancing back at the camp. 'The men will be taking a break shortly. You're welcome to stay for some billy tea—and some I guess you could call them damper scones."

"That would be lovely!" Chrissy said, looking to Tori for approval.

"Billy tea, yes. I'll pass on the scones," Tori drawled.

"They're better than you think, Chrissy. Don't let Tori put you off." Haddo's eyes narrowed over Tori's small, vivid face. She had plaited her dark red hair into a silky rope that hung down her back. Her cream shirt was silk, her skintight jodhpurs a darker cream. Her riding boots, very expensive, were dark tan with a high gloss. She looked perfect for a fashion shoot, her very slim, attenuated body falling naturally into elegant lines that could have been poses, but were not. Tori had always been marvellously graceful.

"What's with you?" he asked.

"Nothing," she retorted, with heightened crispness.

"You're not usually a woman of few words."

"Why is it your voice always has that thread of mockery?"

He shrugged. "I don't plan it. But come along. Everybody knows you, but I can introduce Chrissy." Haddo moved off, leaving the girls to follow.

Chrissy's big brown eyes sparkled. Most of the men were middle-aged, but there was one young blond guy, in a check shirt and tight jeans, with a black akubra shoved back on his head. He looked kinda cute...

"Who's the blond guy?" she whispered urgently, taking Tori's arm. "He looks a bit like one of those western movie stars, don't you think?"

"As a matter of fact, no," Tori answered truthfully.

"Come on—he *does!*" Chrissy insisted, as if she had big plans.

"Well, maybe just a teeny-weeny bit," Tori relented. The jackeroo, Shane McGuire, looked *nothing* like a movie star in her opinion, but he *was* nice-looking, with blue eyes and blond curly hair. Better yet, everyone liked him. But there was the fact Chrissy had lived through a couple of very harrowing years with an abusive partner. Shouldn't she be more cautious?

"What's his name?" was Chrissy's follow-up question.

"Behave yourself, Chrissy," Tori admonished. So much for Zack, she thought—and good riddance. "Okay, it's Shane McGuire. He's the jackeroo."

"He's not married?" Chrissy queried. "If you say he is, I think I'll cry."

"Save your tears." Tori laughed. "Haddo doesn't hire married jackeroos."

They have to learn the ropes before they can think of settling down. Anyway, Shane's only about twenty, twenty-one. Life hasn't properly begun at that age." Hadn't she made a total fool of herself at sixteen?

"It began for me when Mum died," Chrissy said, shrugging off some pretty horrendous times.

"I know. I'm sorry." Tori, who had suffered her own bad times and because of them was empathetic, hugged Chrissy's thin shoulders.

"That's okay. I've found a pal like you." Chrissy smiled. "Am I allowed to speak to him?"

"Of course you are."

"I mean when you aren't around." Chrissy watched in delight as a big flock of yellow-crested cockatoos came to rest in the coolabahs on the opposite bank, looking for all the world like giant white flowers.

"You don't have to consult me about whom you want to speak to, Chrissy. But just take it easy, okay?"

"Yeah, sure!" Chrissy gave her saviour a great big hug.

So what have we here? Tori was left to wonder. *Love at first sight?* Her biggest regret was there hadn't yet been time to get Chrissy's front tooth fixed, but maybe someone like Shane would see past that to the sweetest of expressions and those big brown eyes?

Chrissy had already confessed she would love to stay on Mellarinka if Haddo would only give her a job. She was willing to do anything—domestic work, or she could learn stock work. She would die to become a jillaroo, but that wasn't on the cards. Mellarinka was a man's world. School-teaching wasn't in her repertoire either. Chrissy had paid little or no interest in schoolwork at the various homes she had been shunted around, and consequently her three Rs were pretty sketchy.

That was something else Tori was set to fix. School would start up again tomorrow morning at nine o'clock sharp—a time Tori had come to think of as more or less daybreak.

In the end Tori didn't have the heart to refuse a damper scone smothered in lashings of wild plum jam. Wild plums grew in abundance right across the desert fringe, and they did make good jam—deliciously tart. The scone however, stuck in her chest. Maybe another mug of billy tea—which was good—would wash it down.

She rose from the fallen log she and Chrissy were sitting on—Chrissy was tucking into the scones with gusto—to walk towards Lliam, the half-Irish, half-Chinese camp cook. She should have put her sunglasses back on. The sun was dazzling, making her squint. She put up a hand to protect her eyes, then in the

next breath she was caught in a one-armed grab from behind, and swung aside so powerfully she thought she might crack a rib. As it was, she fell to her knees, her face white with shock.

“Let go, yah bastard!”

It was Snowy, the stockman, roaring a whole chain of obscenities, ladies present or not. At about the same time she heard Haddo let out a harsh rattle of pain.

Oh, no! Instantly she realised what had happened. Like a fool, she had walked too close to the rear of the pack donkeys. They were standing together, four of them—bad-tempered at the best of times, not an affectionate one between them. These donkeys would just as soon greet you with a bite or a swift kick than with brays, snorts or snuffles, but they were intelligent, and could carry food and gear across the roughest terrain. Haddo must have seen she was in danger and come instantly to her rescue. The mule hadn’t taken a bite out of *her*, but it had certainly got a grip on Haddo’s arm.

How could she have been so careless? she upbraided herself, wanting to sink through the bright red earth. Haddo was paying the price. To make it worse, she knew all about these mules—their stubbornness, their cleverness, and their disconcerting habit of trying to sink their big teeth and jaws into anyone who just so happened to annoy them. These weren’t animals suitable to be kept as pets. They weren’t at all calm, and they didn’t particularly like people. One always needed some protective weapon to hand just in case they played up.

She bent over, gulping for air, aware that everyone was crowding around her.

“Jeepers, Vicki!” Chrissy was crouching beside her, aghast at what had happened with such lightning speed. Not familiar with donkeys, Chrissy had imagined they would be very mild-tempered animals—not to say exceptionally docile.

“Tori? You’re okay?” Haddo demanded brusquely. He too went down on his haunches, his burning blue gaze moving steadily over her.

For an instant she couldn’t speak. All the silly bravado had been knocked out of her. Then slowly she lifted her head. “I’m so sorry, Haddo,” she said, in a small, subdued voice. “So ashamed. I should have realised. Did the blighter bite you?”

“It certainly had a go,” Haddo confirmed wryly, ignoring his left arm, where the donkey’s teeth had made quite a dental impression.

“I’m just so sorry,” she repeated, tears springing into her eyes.

“Forget it.” He drew her to her feet, noticing how she gave a little involuntary wince. “Did I hurt you?” He knew he had grabbed her hard and fast, but there had been no help for it.

“You could have cracked a couple of my ribs,” she tried to joke.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you checked out.”

He was serious. She knew that, so she shook her head. “I’m okay—*really*. Why didn’t you just let the damned thing bite me?”

He suddenly smiled, his good humour utterly convincing. “Because I need you to teach the kids.”

“Brilliant!” She found herself smiling back into his face. Something she hadn’t done for a long, long time. “You have every right to be angry with me.”

“Well, I’m not,’ he clipped off, powerfully affected by that smile.

“You’ve had all your shots, haven’t you?” she asked solicitously.

“Of course. Everything’s okay, Tori. End of story.”

“You need something to put on that, Haddo,” Chrissy broke in, sounding as subdued as Tori.

“Yes, you do,” Tori agreed, staring at Haddo’s strong arm. The donkey’s teeth had barely punctured the skin, but there would be a lot of deep bruising.

“Snowy will find me something.” Haddo shrugged it off. Snowy was a medicine man of some renown, with a host of bush remedies many qualified doctors would like to get their hands on.

Snowy, in fact, was grinning happily. “Lucky I had a stout stick, eh, boss?”

Snowy—so called because of his fine head of snow-white curls, which contrasted with his shiny black skin—was still holding it, after having given the still glaring pack donkey a few telling whacks before it could be persuaded to let Haddo’s arm go.

“Not the first time you’ve come to my rescue, Snowy,” Haddo said, with real affection.

Snowy, a wry sixty, pointed a thumb at his own chest. “Snowy will never let anyone or anythin’ hurt yah, boss. Now, I’m gonna look around and mix you up somethin’ to put on that.”

“Thank you so much, Snowy,” Tori broke in gratefully. “Haddo can’t afford to overlook any injury—battery of shots or not.”

After dinner Philippa had fallen into the habit of playing the piano—which just happened to be a Steinway concert grand—to entertain them. The whole family loved the fact Philippa was so talented, and she had been greatly blessed in that she had miraculously escaped any form of arthritis in her pianist’s hands. Haddo and Tori were well used to her wonderful musicianship, but Chrissy, who had only heard some truly woeful strumming in her short and troubled life, was enthralled. While Philippa played she had a captive audience in Chrissy, who

was soaking up her various experiences like a desert claypan soaked up rain.

At one stage that evening Haddo left the drawing room. Tori gave it a few minutes, then quietly went after him. Man-like, Haddo was totally discounting his injury, but she knew his arm had to be hurting badly. Kerri and Marcy would be arriving in the morning—they stuck together like sisters—so she would get fewer and fewer opportunities to talk to Haddo alone. Despite the lack of encouragement, Marcy still thought she had a chance with Haddo, and Kerri, as her friend, was going to do her best to help Marcy out. Tori wasn't about to wish Marcy luck. She wanted someone altogether different for Haddo.

Like who, young lady? It was hard to get away from her inner voice.

Haddo wasn't in his study. The library was in darkness. He must have gone upstairs. She debated following, but she still thought she would never get over being so carelessly negligent that day. She wasn't ignorant of the bush and bush life. She knew as well as anyone how ill-tempered donkeys could be, and she had practically walked right into the pack, upsetting the leader. It had seemed to her that over dinner—she had watched him very closely—Haddo had had a faint pallor beneath his tan, something that made her feel very guilty. She didn't like to speculate on what might have happened if the donkey had got its jaw around her own slender arm. The reason it hadn't was Haddo.

"Haddo?" she called as she walked along the upstairs gallery. If he was in his rooms she wanted to warn him in advance she was coming.

Not like the last time, dear! The voice volunteered another scathing little comment.

"Haddo?" She slowed her steps as she approached the bedroom door. It was open, and the lights were on. That did nothing to soothe her nerves. When he suddenly appeared in the open doorway she actually jumped. "You startled me," she croaked.

"Now, how could I startle you, Tori?" he asked. "You were looking for me. Here I am. Do you want to come in?" He stood away from the door, the soft, long-sleeved blue shirt he had been wearing at dinner unbuttoned and pulled free of trousers threaded with a belt.

"You mean I'm *allowed*?"

He just smiled—a smile that made every other guy's look washed out. "Come in, Elf. I was just going to put some of Snowy's concoction on my arm."

"I knew it was hurting," she said worriedly, her eyes travelling around the large room, with its twelve-foot ceilings. The suite comprised an adjoining dressing room, a bathroom beyond, and a sitting room on the opposite side. There was nothing even mildly rustic about it, given the Outback setting. It was very grand, very comfortable, very masculine, with a big bold aboriginal

painting hung above the huge bed she had once managed to negotiate. She had never worn that nightgown again.

“Just a bit,” he conceded. “Could have been worse. The brute could have taken a piece out of you. Now, that would have been a catastrophe. That particular donkey has been playing up of late. When the muster is over we’ll set it free.”

As he was speaking he was stripping off his shirt, intending to replace it with a short sleeved tee. For all he knew Snowy’s green ointment could stain.

Tori stood transfixed, her throat suddenly dry and her heartbeats picking up erratically. God, he had a superb body! She found herself blushing hotly. What the heck was she doing here?

Ask a silly question, you get a silly answer, dear. You can’t keep away.

She tried to ignore the taunt. “Can I do that for you?” she offered, watching him pick up a small painted pot of ointment from the bedside table.

“You’d like to try your hand at playing nurse?” He searched her small, fine boned face, his smile faintly wry. She was wearing a very pretty short dress with a silver, blue and green pattern. As usual, she looked like an exquisite pool nymph. The deep green of the silk exactly matched her tilted eyes. The way she had arranged her long mane fascinated him. She had any number of ways: up, down, plaits, coils, ponytails that fell down the back or to one side. Tonight she had left her hair loose and curly, just the way he liked it. It sprang away from her face, framing it in a rich rosy cloud.

“Why not a nurse when I’m going to be a schoolmarm?” she parried, advancing several steps across the Persian rug towards him.

“You’re not nervous about it, are you? You’ll be fine.”

“Of course!” She threw up her chin. “I’m going to barricade the door so no one can get out. Some kids really hate school. They want to be outside communing with nature. You know they do.”

“They might get hysterical if you tried to lock them in,” he commented dryly.

“You know perfectly well I was only joking. Leave it to me. I can handle a bunch of children.” *I think.* “Chrissy has asked to sit in on some of the classes.”

“Poor Chrissy.” He sighed. “I guess she missed out on a bunch of stuff. That’s a good idea.”

“Pip wants to help her as well.”

“Another good idea,” he replied. “Now, are you going to come over here, or do you intend to work your magic from there?”

He sounded both casual and mocking, his brilliant blue eyes alight with some sort of devilment. “Shut up, Haddo,” she said sweetly.

His skin was the colour of polished bronze. There was a fine mat of dark hair on his strongly muscled chest. Talk about a six-pack! She could search the world and she would never find a man she wanted more. His upper left arm, to her shame, was already turning into a spectrum of livid colours—black, blue, yellow, purple.

“Oh, dear, dear, dear,” she sighed, taking the little pot of ointment from him. “This is all my fault.”

“Yes, it is,” he agreed, straight-faced.

“No need to rub it in.”

“What else can I say?” He relented, and laughed. “That’s what you’re supposed to do, by the way, Tori. Rub it in. *Gently*, please.”

“A good thing I don’t want to hurt you,” she said meaningfully.

“You mean there’s a chance we might start over?”

“No chance,” she retorted. She took a small amount of the dark green unguent onto her index finger, then began to apply it very tenderly to his badly bruised arm. “This has coloured up very quickly, wouldn’t you say?”

“It’s doing what Snowy intended it to do,” he answered, thinking that under her ministrations he was bound to lose his phenomenal control. “The ointment brings out the bruising”

“It smells lovely,” she said, in some surprise, having expected a strong medicinal smell. She lightly sniffed the fragrant substance—what was it? Could it be good for the skin?—then gently eased him down onto the side of the bed with a little pressure on his shoulder. “You can’t tower over me.”

He put his arm around her waist, drawing her closer. “Unlike the donkey, I don’t bite.”

“So, tell me, have you *changed*, then?” she asked crisply, hiding her searing reaction. Why didn’t she just collapse into his lap, like she’d used to when she was a kid?

“Can’t you tell a changed man when you see one? This has to be the best night of my life, Victoria. You have the most exquisitely gentle fingers.”

Those same fingers gave a little tremble. “Being nice to me *now* won’t win me over,” she warned. “I’m treating you like I’d treat any other casualty.”

“I don’t think so,” he drawled.

“You’ll just have to believe me.” She continued on for a moment in silence, drenched in sensuality. “I think that does it,” she said briskly. “I’ll just wash the ointment off my hands, if I may? Though it smells lovely—like a mix of wildflowers. I wonder what’s in it?”

“I’ll ask Snowy to tell you when he gets back. Grab a fresh handtowel off the stack.”

“Will do.”

She was back in a moment, watching him shrug into a navy T-shirt that clung to his splendid physique. Michelangelo would have *adored* him.

“Feel any better?” she asked expectantly.

“I don’t deserve you,” he said, pinning her gaze. ‘I’m pretty sure you’ll have to keep doing this.’

She saw the mischief. Blood came to her cheeks. “Have your fun.”

“*Seriously*, sweet, penitent Tori—how I love you this way—I appreciate your concern.”

“No problem!” she replied, turning on her heel so he wouldn’t see the expression in her eyes. “Are you coming downstairs again?”

“Sure!” He caught her up at the door, giving her a challenging look. “Do you mind if I give you a thank-you kiss?”

“We’ve had our last kiss—remember?” She felt duty-bound to remind him.

“A *cousinly* kiss is what I mean,” he corrected her, his beautiful smile twisting a little.

“If you must!” She presented her alabaster cheek, thinking how very difficult it was going to be to discourage such a practice.

“Oh, I *must*!” he assured her, his voice deep and dark, and turned her into his arms.

It was intolerable. And at the same time it was what in her heart of hearts she so fervently longed for. Haddo was the best and the worst of her. A dyed-in-the-wool feminist would have been scandalised.

“You’re so sure of yourself, aren’t you?” she accused him, hostile little sparks flaring in her green eyes.

They stood inches apart, staring at one another.

“Yes, of course I am,” he retorted. “And you wouldn’t have me any other way.” He took her wrists and raised them, kissing the delicate inner network of blue veins one after the other.

She shivered, every nerve leaping beneath the thin sheath of skin. “I’ve never met a man with more ego.”

His blue eyes glittered. “Come on,” he scoffed. “I’m in a unique position to know what goes on inside that ruby head of yours.”

“Are you now?” Rebellion hit her bloodstream. Incongruously, it was mixed in with a wildly rampaging excitement. She fixed him with an intense stare. “Okay, so what am I thinking now, Svengali?”

“You want to open your mouth for me,” he said, in that dark, seductive voice that rocked her to the core.

As a kiss it was fabulous. Instantaneously marvellously familiar—she hadn't forgotten the first time—like the meeting of predestined soul-mates and at the same time powerfully and wondrously *new*. Such kisses were surely the most fantastic gift.

As a lover he would be flawless. For the last four years she had fantasised about those moments out of time when he had had her in his bed—kissing her, cupping her breast, her nipples on fire, his sex against hers for all their brief coverings. Fleeting heaven! And she had to be neurotic, because she had never recovered.

People looked at her, read about her, and immediately jumped to the conclusion she couldn't be a virgin. Not with her lifestyle, her perceived sophistication. In the third millennium too.

Well, she *was*. How was that for fidelity, however angst-ridden? Why else would she be letting him do this to her? It was like diving into an unknown crater lake without a second thought. She had sworn she would never again let him see how much she loved him. He couldn't be getting the message.

When he stopped kissing her she was breathless, bubbles in her blood.
“That’s your little thank-you kiss, is it?” she gasped.

“You’re nearly twenty-one, aren’t you?”

“So what happens *then*?” She eyed him sharply.

“You’ll have to wait to find out.”

“You mean we might end up in your bed again?” Her voice dripped sarcasm.

“You were *sixteen*, Tori, for God’s sake,” he groaned.

“Do I have to be twenty-one?”

“Well, twenty-one’s not *that* young,” he pointed out bluntly. “A heck of a lot better than sixteen.”

“Put the whole thing out of your mind,” she said. “I’m not going to be staying long enough. I’m going to take my punishment—for that’s what it is—and then I’m zooming back to Sydney. If your dear old friend Marcy, who’s arriving tomorrow, knew about this, and about the sorts of things you’re saying to me, she’d kick up a big fuss.”

His answer was to take her face gently between his hands. “Who’s Marcy?” he asked, then dropped another kiss on her small, straight nose.

CHAPTER THREE

TORI was fast asleep when a pounding came on her bedroom door.

Oh, my gosh!

She turned on her back with a start. This was a big day for her. The most important day of her life if one considered this was the very first job for which she would be paid. The night before she had been full of good intentions—full of confidence, for that matter. There were only about a dozen or so kids she would have in front of her. From a couple of little pre-schoolies to the eldest, Charlie Worangi, who apparently was stuck on Grade Five. In her efforts to impress Haddo—she pretended she didn't care, but she cared desperately—she had even gone so far as to set the alarm on her bedside clock for seven a.m.

Seven a.m. had well and truly come and gone. The digital reading was now 8:10. Frantically she tried to kick her legs free of the top sheet that somehow during the night had begun to wind round her like a mummy.

“Tori?”

She could have sobbed with frustration. “Go away!” she yelled furiously, finally fighting free of the sheet.

“I’m coming in.”

“What for? A quick chat?” Hurriedly she looked about for something non-valuable to pitch. “Try it and I’ll call the police.”

“I *am* the police, by the way.” Haddo was standing in the now open doorway, flaunting his signature blazing energy and the Great Outdoors. “Surely you could make an effort on your first day?” he said, making no attempt to disguise his disgust.

“I set the alarm!” she cried.

“No!”

“I did too!” She picked up the small clock and aimed it at him.

He caught it deftly, not even glancing at it. “School starts at precisely nine o’clock. Tracey was always there well beforehand.”

“Very commendable,” she said briskly. “Now, are you going to get out of here and let me get dressed?”

His blue eyes ran all the way over her. She looked absolutely enchanting, his Elf, but he wasn’t going to tell her that. “Whatever happened to the fancy

nighties?"

She tugged at the short hem of her girlish pink cotton and white lace number. "I find it very strange you remember that nightie."

"It was lovely!" he said. "Though it didn't give you much cover." He started to turn away, all dynamic male. "I'll organise some breakfast for you."

"I don't *want* breakfast." She wrapped both her slender arms around her, radiating irritation.

"As I said, I'll organise breakfast for you. I don't want you falling asleep on the kids. Then I'll take you down to the schoolhouse and introduce you properly. They know who you are, of course, but not as their schoolmarm. It might be an idea to dress the part."

"I've never had the pleasure of wearing a corset," she said sharply. "So, how many at the last count?" she asked, busy unwinding her long plait.

"Wait and see," he said.

"What happened to Chrissy?" she exploded. "Couldn't Chrissy have come to wake me up? I thought she was my friend."

"Don't take it out on Chrissy." He shrugged. "Chrissy couldn't come because the last time I saw her she was out riding, about two miles from home. That was around sevenish."

"Oh!" Chrissy had taken to Outback life like a brolga to water. "Chrissy is used to waking up early. I'm *not*. Now, get out of here, Haddo."

His sapphire eyes glittered. "Technically, Victoria, I'm your *boss*."

"Sorry!" She didn't sound in the least sorry. "I've known you so long I forget these things. Try again. Could you *please* get out of here, *sir*?"

Haddo and Tori were greeted with big beaming smiles, rippling giggles and clapping hands. It was obvious this was an *event*. Tori did a rough head-count. Fifteen pairs of eyes were staring back at her. The two of them stood at the front of a large airy classroom, furnished with four long desks to each side of the room, and divided by a wide centre aisle—for me to do the walking, Tori thought, charmed by the reception. Each desk could easily accommodate four to five students, although three sets of four and one of three had spread themselves out at the desks now. Fitted into the wall behind them was a monster blackboard for the teacher to write on. At the centre of the dais was the teacher's large comfortable desk and chair, with a couple of trays on it and a whole selection of chalks, pens and pencils, whatever. Someone had placed four perfect yellow lilies in a small dark blue ceramic vase.

The schoolhouse had only one double doorway but several side windows, and looked out onto the main tree-lined driveway up to the home compound, so Tori thought she would know exactly who was coming and going. The small

white-painted timber building was protected from the hot desert sun by a broad verandah, and big white ceiling fans whirred overhead. Haddo, who appeared to be idolised by the children, introduced her as “Miss Victoria”.

“Good morning, Miss Victoria.” Young voices drawled her name in unison.

“Good morning, children.” Best not call them kids.

“So far so good,” Haddo murmured a few moments later, giving Tori a quick smile just as Chrissy slipped into the classroom and collapsed at the back desk.
“Ah, there you are, Chrissy,” he said.

“I’m so sorry I’m late.” Chrissy went pink.

“Barely a minute.” He smiled. Chrissy could come and go as she pleased. Not so Miss Victoria. “Children, this is Miss Chrissy, who will be helping Miss Victoria out and sitting in on the lessons.”

“Morning, Miss Chrissy!”

The children shifted in their seats, heads swivelled. Not one, but two teachers. Miss Victoria had the most amazing long curling dark red hair, pulled back in a ponytail, and eyes as green as a deep lagoon with the sun on it. Miss Chrissy had short corkscrew dark curls that went everywhere, and big brown eyes. Miss Victoria was dressed the part in a blouse and skirt. Miss Chrissy was in jeans with a blue T-shirt. The children were fascinated.

“I’m off,” Haddo told Tori crisply. “You can tell me all about it at dinner. Kerri and Marcy will be arriving early afternoon, don’t forget.”

“No way to put a stop to it?” she asked sweetly.

For a minute it looked as if he was about to drop a careless kiss on her cheek, but instead he laughed, waved a hand and strode off down the aisle, calling, “Goodbye, kids! I’ll be hearing about how you behave. That goes for you too, Charlie!” He directed a finger in Charlie’s direction.

Eleven-year-old Charlie, whose greatest ambition was to become a stockman on the station, gave a whoop of laughter. Why anyone would want to go to school was a mystery to Charlie, but to run off or go walkabout would be to jeopardise his chances with the big boss—Mister Haddo. Charlie stopped lolling and sat forward, looking as if he was going to make an effort to pay attention. Of course it wouldn’t help him one bit to become a good stockman, much less a tracker, but the teachers were so pretty—especially Miss Victoria—so he guessed it was cool.

By the time Tori rang the bell for “little” lunch, sent down for the children from the homestead—no junk food, just sandwiches, fruit, muffins—she had formed a few ideas of her own. First of all she had made each child come up to the blackboard to write their name, age and class. Next she had decided she wanted one brightly painted feature wall, where the children could display their

artwork. She wondered what talent she might discover. She had also decided the schoolroom needed a small upright piano, so there could be singing. She rather fancied forming a junior choir. She wasn't a highly accomplished pianist, like Pip, but she had some talent, and had managed to gain an Associate Diploma by the time she left school.

By three o'clock, the end of the day—though it was two o'clock for the two little four-year-olds, who took a nap anyway—she was bursting with ideas. The children had not only to be taught, they had to be entertained. Music, the universal language, would be a good start. She didn't need Haddo to supply the piano—though she had better talk to him about it first—she could buy it herself and have it trucked out.

"I didn't know I was such an idiot!" Chrissy said, folding her skinny arms over her head. "Even Charlie knows some of his tables. And that little kid, Leila, writes better than I do. Just look at her name and mine." Chrissy, a virtual orphan, who had regularly been beaten up at her various homes, pointed to the board.

"Some of the best-educated people in the country have terrible writing," Tori laughingly pointed out. "There's no such thing as a copybook, like in the olden days. You should see Pip's writing. It's beautiful. Haddo has a good hand. And mine's not too bad."

"It's beautiful!" Chrissy said strongly. "And you're so *smart!* The kids really enjoyed their lessons. The way you put things and explain. I did too."

Tori's tender heart broke a little. "Don't worry, you'll catch up to where you want to be in no time, Chrissy," she promised. "All you have to do is *want* to."

In the time she had been on Mallarinka Chrissy had been protected and cushioned by the kindness of the household—Tori, Philippa, Haddo, motherly Kate in the kitchen, with whom she got on extremely well—and had an uncomplicated friendship with the house girls Kate had trained so well. But now, within days of the arrival of Haddo's sister Kerri—tall, bone-thin, very glamorous, unhappy and because of it on the caustic side—and her friend Marcy—by way of contrast, a short, very pretty brunette, carrying a few extra pounds, but shapely with it—the atmosphere took on an abrupt sea change. Marcy, who was remarkably skittish around Haddo, was given to passing snappy, loud comments when he wasn't around, and Chrissy was the butt of many of Marcy's wisecracks. Sometimes they were funny, but they had a core of ridicule that came perilously close to insult.

Tori came in for her share too. The only difference being that Tori had no

difficulty firing off a quick retort, while Chrissy couldn't handle repartee, and she had no confidence whatever around "posh" women like Kerri and Marcy—the social elite. As far as Chrissy was concerned they came under the label of "rich bitches". Women who had never had to fend for themselves and were way out of touch with what Tori sardonically called "the lower orders". And the first and last time Marcy had smilingly interrogated Chrissy about what had happened to her front tooth—feigning fascination—Tori had told her if she didn't ease off Chrissy she might be missing a front tooth herself.

"Oh, sorry—sorry, Victoria!" Marcy, dressed in a white linen shirt and matching trousers, performed an exaggerated salaam. "You're such a firecracker, aren't you? You've done so many wild things since you were a kid—and your friend, Chrissy!" She rolled her eyes. "You found her in a shelter? What next? Is that a wig she's wearing, or her own hair? And what's she doing down at the school? Not helping you *teach*, I bet! She's got no verbal skills. I try to engage her in conversation but she can't even string two words together. Even when I say hello she's pushed for an answer."

"Whereas you more or less don't let up," Tori retorted bluntly, stung on Chrissy's behalf. "Chrissy is having difficulty responding because you go out of your way to make her nervous. To my mind, that's cruel."

Marcy's bosom heaved with the level of affront. "I can't begin to imagine why Haddo is so fond of you," she muttered grimly.

"That's something even I'm not capable of answering," Tori quipped. "But then, you're no closer to Haddo than you were six or seven years ago. That's *sad*, Marcy. Maybe it's time you asked yourself the Big Question: *could I be wasting my time?*"

Marcy threw back her shiny head, cut in the latest style, "Terribly amusing, my dear." She glared. "But then you always were obnoxious."

"Charming!" Tori murmured. For some reason Marcy, several years older, had always been afraid of her. Why, exactly?

"And you're heading for a cropper." Marcy's crystal tones sharpened. "Don't think I don't know why you've been sent out here. The family are worried about the sort of people you hang out with."

"Your sort, Marcy," Tori reminded her dryly. "You know—the so called shakers and movers. The *in* crowd."

Marcy all but choked. "The only difference being *I* know how to behave. You simply *don't*."

"So why is it you always look envious?" Tori smiled. "What you don't take into account is that I'm smart, and I recognise it in you. Anyway, I'm doing great! Not that it's any of your business. And, yes—I do believe *I'm* family,

while you're just a visitor here. So don't try telling me off. Or Chrissy."

"Oh, my goodness!" Marcy made a face, as if she had never encountered such rudeness. "A visitor? Everyone knows I'm much *more* than that. Kerri and I forged our friendship in school, and Haddo and I have always been close, as it so happens. Why else would he have me here?" She gave a thin, knowing, smile. "We all have our little secrets, dear. What would *you* know about what's gone on in the past few years? And what about what *you* have to deal with? You don't fool me one little bit with that smart aleck manner you've adopted with Haddo. It's just an act. Haddo is *far* more to you than you're letting on."

"Of course he is!" Tori flashed a breezy smile. "I won't lie. He's *Cousin* Haddo, and I just adore him. But to get back to Chrissy. She was really enjoying being here until you arrived. It's important to me we keep it that way."

"Right you are!" Marcy gave an unkind laugh. "But how could a little street person like Chrissy be at home *here*? As the old saying goes, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. If she feels bad it's because she recognises that fact. She's totally out of place when you consider what her natural habitat has to be. She could have been doing drugs, for all you know. Or prostitution. Lovely! Her feeling bad has nothing to do with me, Victoria. Actually, I've made attempts to be kind to her."

The redhead in Tori got the upper hand. "I don't regard barely disguised ridicule as kindness," she said, very sharply indeed. "And, for the record, Chrissy is totally drug-free and she was never into prostitution. You think you're so superior to the Chrissys of this world, don't you, Marcy?"

Marcy gave a throaty laugh, placing a hand on her curvy hip. "Don't think so, I know so, dear."

"Such is arrogance." Tori sighed. "Shouldn't you remember it was just an accident of birth? Chrissy, through no fault of her own, was dealt a really bad hand. Don't we, with so much more, have a responsibility to help out? If you spent some time checking out how the less fortunate live, it might make you a better person."

"Please don't lecture me, dear," Marcy said, with a curl of her lip.

"And you can quit calling me *dear* in return," Tori replied sharply. "You consider yourself pretty classy, but a *real* lady would never torment anyone less fortunate than herself. Would you try to remember that for the duration of your stay?"

"Can't promise anything." Marcy glanced pointedly at her designer watch. "Better get cracking, then. Haddo wants me to join him for the day."

Tori, who'd been about to turn away, stopped short. "Now, there's a howler if ever I've heard one. Pip is taking morning classes for me while Haddo flies

Chrissy and me into Koomera Crossing. We'll be taking the chopper. Chrissy has a dentist appointment. We want to get things started on fixing that tooth. She'll need a porcelain crown."

"Ugh!" Marcy shuddered, as though Chrissy was in desperate need of a full set of false teeth. "Makes you happy, does it, *dear*? This dispensing largesse to the poor and the needy?"

"Yes, it does, actually," Tori answered quietly. "I've come to realise that's what makes being an heiress worthwhile." She turned on her heel before her disgust grew too much for her. "See you this evening, Marcy," she called over her shoulder. "Kerri is a wonderful horsewoman. Why don't you get her to help you brush up on your many lessons?"

Marcy started with indignation. "Why the hell would I want to ride a *horse*?" she asked haughtily, and strode away in the opposite direction.

While Chrissy was bravely coping with her dental appointment—the second of her life, the first having been bad enough to make her think of it ever after as torture—Haddo and Tori took a walk around the prosperous Outback town, which had its own bush hospital, with visiting medical and dental specialists. At the well-stocked pharmacy Tori bought a few toiletries Pip wanted, then they headed towards a good coffee shop.

Once inside, they were shown to a quiet banquette that looked out on the broad sunlit main street. Four-wheel drives and utilities were parked practically bumper to bumper to either side. "How are you going to go about convincing Marcy she's not the love of your life?" Tori asked by way of conversation, after their order for coffee and sandwiches had been taken.

"Why are you so desperate to get me to?" Haddo asked, equally casual. "Are you jealous?"

"Hell! I hate you," she said flippantly. "Haven't you found that out yet?"

"I'm okay with your hating me." He shrugged. "It makes you heaven to kiss."

She flushed. "The kissing has to go! It's not in my best interests. I can't worry about you."

He gave a half-laugh. "You should. I'm getting on. Damn nearly thirty, and I have a compelling need to marry and have kids."

"Marcy can't help?"

"Ah, don't be ridiculous," he said, shaking his crow-black head. "There have been women in my life other than Marcy."

Her mind immediately darted back to a few. "Yes, that's right. There was

Georgina Thomas—and whatever happened to Rosie Armitage? I always liked Rosie. She was very sweet to me when people like Marcy were never nice. Marcy's not good around Chrissy either."

He nodded, looking directly at her. "It hasn't escaped me. I'll have a word with her."

"That might be helpful. Is Kerri's marriage falling apart? She won't speak to me."

"She's jealous of you, Elf. Don't you realise that?"

"Oh, come on, Haddo," she said quietly. "Why would Kerri be jealous of me?"

"You actually *know* the answer to that question," he said bluntly.

Colour flooded into her flawless skin. "So Kerri's resented me right from the beginning? Is that what you're saying? She was your sister—your only sibling. She wanted all your love and attention. Instead you made a little pet out of me."

His smile was crooked. "I promise you, you were the most enchanting little girl that ever drew breath. You had so much life in you, even after you lost your father and were in so much pain. I couldn't *not* love you, Tori."

She drew a tortured breath. "So why did you treat me the way you did?"

He groaned and put a tanned, elegantly shaped hand to his temple. "Not again! Because you were a *child*, my little *Elf*, with your cute little pointy ears. I absolutely adored them."

She swallowed down a rush of emotion at the use of his old nickname for her. It was part of him—and her. The halcyon days. "Let me remind you I've grown into my ears," she said sharply. She hadn't *really*.

He appraised her with indulgent eyes. "Your ears are fit for a faerie princess, Tori," he consoled her. "As for the myth of my cruel treatment of you. I would have thought I'd made the reason for that abundantly clear. Surely in retrospect you can understand?"

Maybe some part of her did. Only her emotions weren't keeping pace with her head. "I wasn't there for an *orgy*," she told him heatedly.

"You never thought you might have *got* one?" He pinned her emerald-green gaze.

She blinked at the bluntness of his tone, then drew back. "You would never hurt me, Haddo. Anyway, I wasn't wrong about the way you looked at me. You looked at me in a way no one else ever has, and I've had more than my share of attention. Don't deny it. That look led me astray."

"So I made a mistake." He sighed very deeply. "You were just so beautiful. Everything about you cried out, *Haddo, look at me!*"

"So it's still my fault, is it?" she flared.

“It’s *always* the woman’s fault.” He smiled, his blue eyes so intense they made her feel disorientated. “You don’t know your own power.”

“Nor you *yours*,” she said sharply. “If I had to lose my virginity—”

“Have you?” He caught the tips of her fingers, holding them in a tight grip.

“That’s none of your business!” She attempted to wrench her fingers away.

He allowed her to, lounging back, intense one moment, nonchalant the next.

“Well, we’ve been friends for so long I thought you might want to tell me. I’ve already heard about the hundreds and hundreds of kisses.”

She gave a little involuntary shudder. “I couldn’t wait to lose it after *you*.” She gave in to the deeply entrenched desire to hurt him as he had once had hurt her.

“So what held you back?”

She fixed him with spirited eyes. “Who said anything did?”

His expression gentled, and that tender smile played about his lips. “You’re sort of my girl—aren’t you, Tori?”

All the fight went out of her. Just like that. Emotions waxing and waning. “Yes,” she said. “Isn’t that too damned odd? Especially since you turned me into a juvenile delinquent. All I wanted was for you to love me. Instead you made me so unhappy.”

“I’m sorry.” His brilliant eyes reflected all the sincerity in the world.

It shook her, yet perversely pricked her into giving a *who-would-care* flick of her hand. “Anyway, I—” She stopped short as she saw the young waitress fast approaching. “Here comes the coffee.”

“Forget that for a moment,” Haddo said in a deep, quiet voice. “I promise I’ll do everything in my power never to hurt you again as long as I live.”

She was touched that he should say such a thing. How could she ever distance herself from this man? “So help me God. You *must* say it.”

“So help me God,” he solemnly intoned.

It was such a strangely moving moment her eyes filled with brilliant, unshed tears.

The smiling waitress arrived at their table, then set down their order. Black coffee for Haddo, cappuccino for her, and a plate of delicious-looking club sandwiches, artfully decorated with a few little salad items to the side, for them to share.

It was Haddo who restored the mood to something like normality. “To answer your question about Kerri—she’s having trouble conceiving. It’s making her very edgy, and I have to say bitterly sarcastic.”

“I bet her husband’s coping it,” Tori remarked ruefully. “I wouldn’t wish Kerri being bitterly sarcastic on my worst enemy. Why doesn’t she get off that

strict diet she's on? She's so thin, and you must have noticed she doesn't eat! Perhaps if she were eating properly, and took a course in meditation or something, they might have more luck?"

"I sort of suggested that." Haddo's expression was wry. "And maybe a long, relaxing trip together. She needs to unwind."

"If there's one thing I've learned about Kerri, it's that she finds it very difficult to relax." Tori shrugged. "I truly hope she follows your advice. Heck, she could make you an uncle. That's fabulous!" Her face lit up.

"Here's hoping!" He took a test mouthful of the coffee and found it very good. "I wonder how Chrissy is going on? No gain without pain, I guess." He pushed the plate of sandwiches nearer her. "Who's paying? You or me?"

"I'm paying for the porcelain crown. You're paying for this. Another thing. I have an idea Chrissy is falling for your jackeroo, Shane."

Haddo's expression turned deeply sardonic. "She's only known him for about two weeks."

"Maybe it was love at first sight?"

"So what are you suggesting? I have them followed on those early-morning rides?" he asked dryly, picking up a sandwich and casually examining the filling.

"What do you think?" She wanted his opinion.

"They do seem to be attracted to one another," he conceded. "But seriously. Chrissy from all accounts has had a chaotic life. She needs to give herself time before she can chart the right course."

"We've got her on the right course," Tori exclaimed, judging it the right moment to approach him. "What Chrissy really needs is a job."

"I was wondering when you were going to get around to that," he returned smartly.

"Jillaroo?" She tried out Chrissy's number-one ambition, not at all sure Haddo could be persuaded. Chrissy had a natural affinity with horses and animals, and she had experience of farm life—but that bore little resemblance to the rigours and isolation of Outback life.

His handsome mouth tightened. "Tori, you know as well as I do it's a tough life. Generally speaking women aren't mentally strong enough, let alone physically, to handle the hard work involved or the lonely environment. A woman wouldn't have any problem on Mellarinka because I wouldn't tolerate it. But men leading a man's life tend to become very macho. They like to keep the women out."

"But our guys are just great!" she protested.

"That's because you're Victoria Rushford," he told her dryly. "Chrissy could expect to come in for a lot of ribbing."

"It'll be a piece of cake after what Chrissy's lived through," Tori said. "She's been through hell. She desperately needs a safe place, security, a helping hand."

"I thought we were giving her that?" Haddo commented mildly, blue eyes resting on her highly animated face. "Okay, we can start her off doing some time in the store. Then she can graduate to a few minor chores. We'll see how she handles herself and whether she's accepted. She's a nice woman. I like her. But she's not altogether in her comfort zone at the house, is she?" Haddo met her eyes directly.

Tori couldn't deny it. Chrissy remained intimidated by her surroundings. "Especially since Kerri and Marcy arrived," she said. "She's lost all confidence around them." She could have said a lot more, but didn't.

"I suppose if Chrissy genuinely wants a job—"

"Oh, she does!" Her heart bucked up. "She loves being here. She really does."

Haddo held up his hand. "Listen, I really approve of your efforts to help Chrissy, and others like her, but we'll take it a step at a time, if you don't mind. I'd have to think about providing suitable accommodation. We rarely take on jillaroos—for the reasons I stated. Women are trouble just by virtue of the fact they're women. Obviously Chrissy can't bunk in with the men."

"What about the teacher's bungalow behind the schoolhouse?" Tori suggested eagerly, having thought it all through. The bungalow hadn't been in use since Tracey and Jim had married and been allotted more spacious married quarters. "It's set up. All it needs is a lick of paint and a bit of sprucing up. I think she might like that. It would make her feel independent. *Please*, Haddo." She stretched out a hand to him, emerald eyes imploring, the colour in her cheeks emphasising her gleaming white skin.

He took it, giving her an ironic smile. "So, you leave Chrissy here, and you go back to Sydney? Is that it?"

Gently she withdrew her hand, acutely conscious of their electric connection. Haddo would always be able to penetrate her defences. To give herself time she looked out of the bay window. Today she had arranged her hair very artfully, with lots of lustrous stray tendrils. It created a rosy nimbus about her face. She started to finger one of those tendrils. Just the thought of being away from Haddo pierced her with a fresh pain that bordered on agony.

After a while she glanced back, managing blithely, "There's no rush. I haven't quit my job yet. I intend to get a choir going. Music. Painting. Pip thought it a great idea. Oh, and I want the kids to get involved in making a garden around the front of the schoolhouse."

"Anything else?" he enquired politely. "I have a lot of free time on my

hands, as you know.”

She tapped his hand sharply. “Just give me your okay. I’ll do the rest. We could consider putting up a flagpole for them. They’d like that. Flags too—the Aussie flag and Mellarinka’s logo. And what about an adventure playground out the back, fenced in because of the little ones? They *need* me, Haddo, at least until Tracey comes back.” *And I need them.* “Why are you laughing?” She broke off to challenge him, at the same time revelling in the irresistible tenderness of his smile. All right, he had a sensational smile—but he didn’t smile at *everyone* like that, did he?

He shrugged a wide shoulder that pointed up the leanness of waist and hip. “I’m just thinking that deep inside you there was a dedicated schoolmarm fighting to get out. Who would ever have thought it of the Rushford heiress?”

CHAPTER FOUR

FOUR hectic weeks followed, during which time Tori managed to fit in all the things she had intended to do—but only just. The children spent many afternoons after school preparing and then planting out their new garden, with the help of Mellarinka's head groundsman Vince, a station employee for over thirty years. It was Vince's job to keep the homestead's extensive grounds in order, but he was having a lot of fun helping the kids.

"This was a great idea of yours, Miz Victoria," he told her enthusiastically, noting how much the children were enjoying having their hands in the soil. "You'll find all the plants will thrive. They thrive up at the house. They're all adapted to the dry conditions, and all the little lilies and violets are native, as you know."

"I wish you'd help me with the adventure playground, Vince," Tori cajoled. Vince's weather-worn face crinkled into a thousand lines. "The boss told me you were bound to ask and yes, it's okay."

If the children were delighted with making a garden, it was nothing to the fever of anticipation on the afternoon the piano arrived. Pip was there, of course, to witness the arrival, and later to play for the children, who thought everything was wonderful—even Charlie, who had done a lot of work helping Vince, and was making unprecedented progress at school.

Every time Tori passed him she lightly patted his shoulder, with a "Well done, Charlie!"

Archie, the overseer, took time out to chopper Chrissy into Koomera Crossing, where she was at last fitted with a porcelain crown that did wonders not only for her smile, but her confidence. Later she told Tori she felt as if she was walking on air. Chrissy didn't hesitate, either, to have her over-permed corkscrew curls cut off by a male barber, who gave her a really chic short crop that suited her features to a T. Chrissy now spent her mornings catching up with her studies and her afternoons working, under supervision, in the station store. She was on the payroll, and she couldn't have been happier. The store stocked all manner of work gear, and jeans, wind jackets, shirts, belts, bandannas, a range of riding boots and akubras, socks, underwear—you name it. Everything was supplied and sold to the staff at a good discount. As stocks went down they had

to be replenished. Accounts had to be kept. Three staffed the store—four with Chrissy, who slotted in with no problem. No wonder she seemed to be walking on air.

“I’ve never been so happy,” she told Tori, giving her a big hug.

Tori returned the hug with a lump in her throat.

What really put Chrissy over the moon was moving into her own little bungalow. Tori had gone to a lot of trouble to make it tranquil and welcoming.

“My own home!” Chrissy said, starting to cry. “I’m sorry.” She swiped the tears away with the back of her hand.

“Don’t be sorry about tears of joy. Be excited!”

“I *am* excited.” Chrissy stood framed in the doorway, staring rapturously around the open-plan living/dining area that was so bright and cheerful, and the well-equipped galley kitchen with a refrigerator beyond. The bedroom—there was only one—and the bathroom led off a corridor, with a laundry at the rear. “I’ll never, never be able to thank you enough, Vicki.”

Tori swept an arm around her, letting it enclose her friend’s thin shoulders. “Wait and see.” She laughed.

Kerri and Marcy were leaving first thing Monday morning. Haddo was to fly them to Longreach, where they would pick up a domestic flight.

“That’s good!” Pip murmured, the night before, when she heard, having suffered through the stay. “Kerri was never such a wet week before. I’ve told her she has to buck up. She’s got everything going for her, when she thinks of that poor child Chrissy and what she’s survived. If Kerri’s not falling pregnant it’s because she’s forgotten what it’s like to eat. I’ve no patience at all with her fad diet. All she ever seems to do is push food around her plate. Just how thin does she want to be anyway? Moderation is the answer, and daily exercise. Marcy, on the other hand, loves her food. And drink,” she added dryly. “But Haddo must have spoken to her, because I’ve noticed she’s laid off Chrissy.”

“And I promised I’d give her a broken tooth if she didn’t,” Tori confided.

Pip shook with laughter. “Oh, I do love you, Tori.”

“That’s good, because I love you too.” Tori put out a hand, helping Pip rise to her feet.

Pip had already said she was ready to turn in. Both Kerri and Marcy had gone upstairs a short time before. Tori was feeling a little tired herself, but she wanted to finish off the last couple of chapters of her new book. She had visited Venice twice, so she was finding the book—set in that fabled city—doubly engrossing.

Some time later she closed it with a satisfied sigh, then went in search of Haddo to say goodnight. Haddo was always the last to turn in and the first to get up, more often than not pre-dawn. She would never see him as anything else but a dynamo.

She'd thought he would have been in his study, but although the lights were on there was no one there. A horse-lover, her eyes were irresistibly drawn to the magnificent gilded bronze horse that stood on a tall plinth in front of a feature glass panel. She moved over to give it a pat goodnight, aware that the exterior lights were spilling all over the huge date palms in the garden. She glanced out, thinking she could hear voices...

The voices seemed to be mocking her.

Her expression changed, became alert.

She heard them before she saw them. Now they came into sight. Haddo and Marcy, out in the garden. Hadn't she somehow anticipated this? Urgently she moved to one side of the glass panel, blocking herself from their sight. She could feel her face burning with blood. Hope all but abandoned her. Marcy had changed out of the pretty flirty dress she had worn at dinner into a tangerine caftan, decorated all around the neck and halfway down the front with lots of glitter.

It's got to be what it seems to be, her inner voice warned her.

Yet she held fast. Haddo appeared to be frowning—maybe even protesting? Marcy, as usual, her glossy head tilted up to him, was talking a hundred to the dozen.

Tori's stomach began to churn with nausea. She shut her eyes.

Don't look. Don't!

When she opened them again they were locked in a passionate embrace. Even the dark shadows that surrounded them had turned molten. Marcy's arms were fully stretched to encircle Haddo's neck, and his hands were grasping her rounded hips, pulling her to him.

Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Inside she was moaning.

Another of her illusions: she actually thought she could hear her heart breaking. She didn't hate him. She loved him. It would always be that way. Another thing she had to accept, like the loss of her father. Haddo was a sensual man. She knew that. Not everyone was given sexual radiance. She could think of a few people who had it—none of them with conventional good-looks. Sexual radiance was something quite apart. Haddo had been given too much.

She felt a sob stick in her throat. She didn't realise it but tears were running from her eyes. He and Marcy could have been lovers over the years. Why not? Haddo had had plenty of girlfriends. Women literally threw themselves at him.

From the look of it he was still involved with Marcy. Or getting his kicks where he could. Most men would find Marcy a luscious armful. The sheer humiliation of it had her bending over double, like a woman in agony.

Oh, Haddo!

You deserve better, she told herself. He can't kiss you the way he's taken to doing and have maybe another half-dozen women on the go. Marcy among them.

It was her own fault. In the last four years she had tried to ease him out of her life. In a matter of six or seven weeks he had drawn her back inexorably into his force field.

She peered out again, grasping at the edge of the plinth to prevent herself from falling. She hadn't the faintest idea how to handle this new situation, but one thing was certain. It made her position untenable. Just as she had come to love life, she was back on the awful merry-go-round.

To hell with you, Haddo. To hell with you both.

The tableau had changed. Marcy was now clutching Haddo around the waist, her head buried against his chest. Haddo appeared to be intensely moved, his hand lost in her thick shiny hair.

Get going, Tori's inner voice whispered hoarsely. Get out of here.

Trembling hard, she moved stealthily around the bookcases, banging her knee against the big burgundy chesterfield before her shaking fingers found the light switch. She turned the lights in the study off, so she couldn't be seen fleeing, but even flooded with anger had the sense to leave the exterior lights on.

Caught them. Caught them, that inner voice gloated. But hadn't Marcy warned her in a fashion about her little secrets?

She had never felt so empty in her life.

They must have moved with bewildering speed, because the two of them were suddenly in the entrance hall.

God, where to hide?

She heard them talking together, but they hadn't kicked in to full voice. Probably a continuation of murmured sweet nothings.

Behind the chesterfield?

Adrenalin blew in. *Why hide?*

I'm going to kill him if he comes in here.

It wasn't in her nature to stay calm.

Probably the two of them would continue up the staircase. *And so to bed!* No, Haddo would turn off all the downstairs lights first, while Marcy tippy-toed along to his bedroom. With so much else on his mind he might think he had already turned off the study lights.

No such luck! He was coming her way.

She straightened up, ready to confront him.

With his hand on the light switch, the study still in darkness, he questioned, “Tori?”

She had stopped crying by then, but her eyes glittered fiercely. “Hi,” she said, as the lights came on. “How did you know I was in here?”

“I always seem to know where you are,” he answered quietly, immediately sensing her agitation. “It’s like radar.”

“So you *wanted* me to see you out in the garden, did you?” Her arms went tightly around herself lest she run at him, arms flailing.

“My God!” he groaned, and dipped his sleek dark head away.

Guilty as charged.

“Is that all you’ve got to say?” she demanded wrathfully. “You know I have to go home now, don’t you?”

“This *is* your home,” he said, making a move towards her.

He looked so big and formidable she sprang back behind the massive desk. “I’m going home and I’m not coming back. *Ever!*”

“Would you please listen?” he said, slipping into the voice she had heard him use so often when he was taming his wild horses.

“I’m through listening,” she stated. “I knew how dangerous this was for me, coming out here. You’ve just been playing with me, roping me in, you son of a bitch.”

At that designation his eyes flashed blue fire and his jaw muscles clenched. “Tori, you’re the *only* person I know who’s oblivious to the fact *I’m* the boss. Your boss. I don’t know what you think you saw—”

“Ah, don’t give me that.” She chopped him off fiercely. “You were kissing the damned woman. You were running your hands all over her *big* hips.”

A commanding stranger looked back at her. “So that’s what you thought you saw,” he rasped. “Give it a rethink.”

“Are you going to tell me you were just saying a fond farewell?”

“I don’t know about *fond*,” he said, in a perfectly hard voice. “You’re going to have to trust me, instead of rushing to judgement. You’re like a rocket that can fire off at any given moment.”

“And then plummet back to earth? Is that what you’re saying?” She was nearly dancing with rage, hot tears pricking behind her eyes.

“I’m saying I’ve taken all the punishment from you I’m going to take,” he informed her harshly.

“Would you listen to him?” She threw up her hands in a wildly theatrical gesture.

“I think you’d better stop, Tori.” Haddo was trying to control his own

sudden rage. She looked so beautiful, so fiery, incandescent with outrage. And she was so *wrong*. Poor Marcy had come on to him. Her last bid. “Because I swear if you don’t—!”

She came around the desk at a run, filled with a deep primal urge to lock horns. “You’ll do *what*? Not even you would consider three in a bed.”

“Hell!” Haddo’s own temper burst out of bounds. He didn’t speak. He reached for her.

“Don’t you dare!” She defied him frantically, aware of his immense physicality.

He ignored her totally, catching her and pinning her slender, attenuated body hard against him. He had loved her too much for too long. There had to be an end to this.

“You’re hurting me. *You’re hurting me*.” Her breath was coming short. She struggled wildly, but it was no use. She was no possible match for him. No wonder women feared men. They were so strong.

“I don’t care,” he said, his mouth against her hair. “I’ve been far too kind to you up to date. No way am I in love with Marcy. I never have been. The pity of it is, she couldn’t seem to take it in.”

“She just forced herself on you, did she?” She threw up her head, emerald eyes glittering with misery and contempt, the breath labouring in her chest.

“Pretty much,” he said tersely, capturing her face between his strong hands. Never in his life had he felt so close to the edge. Not even that night when as a schoolgirl she had come to him. “I love you, you little wildcat.”

She stopped struggling for a moment. “Oh, God, Haddo, stop it!” Tears welled.

“Grow up!” he ground out.

She couldn’t think straight. She couldn’t *think*. He didn’t give her time. Completely routed, she just stood there, her fists clenched against his chest, while he kissed her into broken submission.

Somehow they were on the chesterfield. She was lying across him...his hand was caressing her naked breast. She tried to suppress the moans but she couldn’t. She was growing weaker and weaker, her body melting against him. The fingers of his one hand brushed along her leg, up her thigh, sliding down over the faint curve of her stomach and under the line of her briefs, a trifle of amethyst satin and lace.

There were brilliant shards of light behind her tightly closed eyes, then his voice. “Tori....” He sounded like Samson, brought to his knees by a mere woman.

Her heart was pounding so fast she thought it would never slow down. Her

throbbing sex *ached*. She let him do what he wanted, surrendering herself to this exquisite pain. Oh, the powerful seductiveness of him! She was a beat away from screaming that she loved him. No matter if he was going to ruin her. *She loved him.* That was her fate.

Haddo too was getting pushed past his limits, his passion for her volcanic.
“My God, what am I doing?”

Abruptly his hand stilled as he tried to hold on to that remaining frail thread of control. His Tori! His little virgin. He knew that for a certainty now. It thrilled him. At the same time it gave him pause. His agonised body was screaming out for release and no one could blame him. He was desperate to take her, to undress her, to hold her naked body astride him. He knew he could do what he so powerfully wished, but the consequences would be swift. This wasn’t what he wanted for her. For either of them. She meant far too much to him. He would die for her.

He drew back, looking down at her bewitching, willowy body, sprawled in utter abandon across him. Her eyes were closed, high colour was in her cheeks, her long curling ruby hair trailed everywhere. Her beautiful, delicate dress, patterned with roses like an impressionist painting, was bunched at her narrow waist, exposing her long slender legs and lower body. Even that little lick of fire at her delta was exquisite. He was wild for her, yet perversely he was all about protecting her. It would never change.

Tenderly he adjusted her clothing and drew her up into his arms, cradling her as if she had morphed into the child she had once been. It was his only hope. He half expected his urgent hunger for her to win out, but slowly she opened her eyes. She looked like a young girl, hypnotised by sensation.

He had to let go of her. He knew he had to.

Her voice was just a whisper. “You couldn’t lie to me, Haddo, could you?” she implored, in those brief seconds pitifully vulnerable.

“I’ll never lie to you,” he said. “I thought I’d sworn that.” He reached behind her back to pull up the zipper of her dress.

“Then you meant what you said?” She began to rake her fingers through her tumbled hair.

“What do you think?” He couldn’t risk even the lightest kiss on her mouth. “You’ll never be rid of me, Tori.” Decisively he lifted her up in his arms, then slowly set her on her feet. “Go upstairs now. Go to bed. It’s late, and you’re all eyes. We’ll talk again tomorrow, I promise. First I have to drop Kerri and Marcy off.”

She stared back at him intently. “You want me?” Despite everything, she couldn’t rid herself of the old grief.

"God, girl, how can you ask?" His striking features were set in stone.

It was an extremely fraught moment. "Then why don't you take me?" She had to hold her fingers against her thrashing heart, lest it leapt out of her body.

He moved away from her to the drinks cabinet, pouring himself a good shot of bourbon. "Because it isn't the time or the place," he said, believing it to be the truth.

She gave a soft keening laugh. "Do you think that time will ever come?"

Haddo tossed the bourbon back in a single swallow, then turned to face her, bluer than blue eyes blazing. "Yes, Tori." He spoke with absolute authority, as if in his mind he had already set the date.

No one was overly concerned when Haddo didn't fly back on time. He might be catching up with the many people he knew in Longreach. He was an experienced pilot, who knew the vast semi-desert area like the back of his hand. Besides, life on the station was very hectic. Cattle trains were coming in and out, dam sinkers were on the job, itinerant stockmen were looking for work, there were visiting vets, freight planes landing on the strip. There was hardly any time for sitting around or watching the clock, so the hours flew.

Mallarinka's head stockman had come upon a couple of stressed and stranded English tourists who had strayed onto the station. They had been taken up to the house for a shower, a change of clothes and a full meal, and a station mechanic had been detailed to service their four-wheel drive. When they had recovered sufficiently they would be pointed in the right direction.

"We were having the most marvellous time too," the wife told them wryly. "But the Outback is so vast! One has to see it to believe it!"

It was also very unforgiving to the unwary.

By two p.m. station people found themselves casting frequent glances towards the sky, willing the Beech Baron to appear, with the boss at the controls. Pip had contacted the domestic airline, to be told Kerri and Marcy had boarded their flight, which had already landed safely in Sydney. Another call confirmed the Beech Baron had departed the commercial airstrip at the time designated on Mr Rushford's flight plan. Was it possible he had put down on another station?

"Haddo would have told us, surely?" Pip said, trying very hard not to let her sick panic show.

School was out, and she and Tori were sitting together, close to the phone and radio. Tori was becoming very distressed, biting her lip and twisting her hands. Pip was perfectly aware that, for all the estrangement that had gone on, Haddo was the love of Tori's life—and as far as she was concerned Tori was the

love of Haddo's life. No one could tell her any differently. But love could also mean a terrible fear of loss.

There had been many dreadful light aircraft crashes in the Outback over the years. These crashes were very traumatic for all station people, where flying was a way of life. Had Haddo encountered a mechanical problem? Had he made a forced landing? They had found out he hadn't cancelled his search and rescue time in accordance with his detailed flight plan which accurately profiled his flight path, but he couldn't be reached by radio. Maybe the radio had packed in? It didn't seem likely, when the faithful Beech Baron was regularly serviced, though radio problems weren't all that unusual. It was too early to call a full-scale air search, though their overseer had come up to the homestead to tell them that in another hour or so he might take the chopper up.

"I'll come with you, Archie!" Tori leapt to her feet. She couldn't sit around doing nothing, with fear rioting through her mind. Though she was making a valiant effort to keep her emotions under control, she knew she was becoming distraught. And why not? What would life be without Haddo? Suffering was made to be borne, but she didn't think she could cope. She hadn't even told him how much she loved him. Instead she had wallowed for four long years in silly, misplaced pride. Haddo always did the right thing. It was she who didn't.

But Archie refused to take her and had scarcely left when a radio message came in from Sovereign Downs. Haddo was on his way home. His radio was out.

"I hope none of you has been worrying," Jack Jensen from Sovereign said, using the usual bush logic that problems with aircraft and choppers weren't unusual, so folk would understand. "Haddo kindly dropped off a spare part I urgently needed. His radio was playing up, so he asked me to give you a call. Have to confess it took a while. We had a bit of an emergency. You should see him shortly, I'd say."

Tori raced out onto the verandah, dragging in a lungful of warm, bush-scented air. A great wedge-tailed eagle sailed overhead. A good omen. Like lightning the news travelled all over the home compound. All was well! The boss was on his way in!

Stockmen way out in the bush, unaware of the home drama, casually noted the Beech Baron flying over.

"I can honestly say I haven't felt so panicky in all my life," Pip finally admitted. "We won't tell him, will we?" She held Tori's eyes. "It would only worry him. Besides, we women of the west are supposed to be stoic."

Haddo landed to a royal welcome. As he taxied into the hangar he could see Tori standing beside one of the station Jeeps. She was waving both her arms in the air. It was a habit she had picked up, starting years back. He thought there was a certain measure of desperation mixed in with the enthusiasm of the wave. He hoped he hadn't worried her with his delayed arrival. Jack Jensen's wife, Meryl, had insisted he stay for lunch. He had wanted to keep going, but found it difficult to refuse. Of course they'd all got talking. Both Jensens were missing their young son, their only child, away at boarding school for the first time.

Tori ran at him, her whole being radiant. "Haddo!"

He heard it for what it was. A great cry of love and relief. He caught her up, swinging her off her feet and holding her there above him. "Poor baby—you've been worrying."

"A little," she said, contradicting that by dropping frantic kisses all over his face. Then she stopped, looking down at him with most beatific smile. "I love you. Love you. Love you."

"I know." He gave a triumphant laugh, lowering her gently to the tarmac. He held her at the waist, staring down into eyes glittering like emerald lakes.

"There couldn't be anyone else in the world for me but you, Haddo," she said, with deep emotion.

"I know that too." His voice exquisitely tender, he bent to kiss her. "I know because that's exactly the way I feel about you."

"Oh, God—oh, thank you! Then why don't you marry me?" she challenged. "I don't want to end up an old lady, knowing you always loved me but never got around to marrying me."

He laughed, slinging an arm around her shoulders and leading her to the Jeep. "What about when you turn twenty-one, in a few months' time?" he suggested. "I couldn't bear to wait any longer than that. Besides, we'll need all of that time to do the planning. There are an awful lot of people we'll have to ask. And most importantly there's your dress."

"My dress?" She burst out laughing as joy poured over her.

"Is a man crazy to want to hold a picture of his beautiful bride in her wedding dress for the rest of his life?" His blue eyes were smiling, but there was seriousness in his expression.

"Why, not crazy at all," she said, unbearably moved. "I think I can promise you won't be disappointed."

"I like that." He hugged her to him, before opening the Jeep door. "Let's head home. Pip will be the first to know—though I don't think she'll be at all surprised."

Pip was out on the verandah waiting for them as they swept up the drive. She watched them walking towards her, their arms locked around one another. Two young people she loved dearly. Their body language confirmed everything she needed to know.

An enormous lightness of spirit seized her. *Isn't love grand!* Her mind filled with her own poignant memories. Nothing in this world, *nothing at all*, could match it.

MELISSA JAMES

Too Ordinary for the Duke?

CHAPTER ONE

Summer Palace, Orakidis City, Hellenia

The Wedding of Her Royal Highness Princess Giulia to His Grace Tobias, Grand Duke of Malascos

THIS day—this past year, in fact—was enough to make a girl believe in fairy tales. Was she, Mari Mitsialos, a bridesmaid at a royal wedding? Was she *really* cousin to a king and a princess royal?

Life took weird turns sometimes...but what a *good* weird this was! Both her cousins, living in the backblocks of Sydney a year ago, were ecstatically married to the people of their dreams—but Charlie was a *king*, and Lia was a princess royal!

What did that make her? Kind of a halfway to royalty, halfway past nowhere person—and she couldn't decide which was better.

Mari smiled when Toby, or the new Grand Duke as he was known in the family, dipped Lia in the Viennese Waltz they'd chosen for their wedding dance. The devoted love she'd always suspected Toby felt for Lia fairly blazed from those summer-blue eyes. And as for Lia, she could barely leave her husband's side long enough to “do the pretty-polite”, as Charlie called it, with all the nobles and royalty of Europe who attended her wedding.

It was still so strange to even be here, let alone be the cousin and bridesmaid of a princess royal—but even her dreamer's heart couldn't fool her. Mari had been born on the ordinary side of the family—the Greek side. Aunty Katina had been a girl from the mountains outside Athens who had boarded a boat for Australia forty years ago, and met Uncle Arthur at a Greek party in Marrickville, Sydney.

She and Uncle Arthur had died in a car crash, never knowing their titles, never knowing Uncle Arthur had, through the destruction of the royal Marandis line of Hellenia, become the heir to a kingdom. Charlie and Lia hadn't known their true identities until a year ago. Great-Uncle Kyri and Great-Aunt Giulia had

never told a soul about their big secret: Uncle Kyri had been a Grand Duke, who'd disappeared from royal life to marry the royal nanny.

But oh, how Great-Uncle Kyri had organised his grandchildren's lives—even from beyond the grave! He'd taught them the language, customs and culture of Hellenia—even the royal dances—and instilled in them a deep sense of duty, so that when they'd found out their true identities and Hellenia's need, they'd barely hesitated before making the hard decision to stay for ever and rebuild the shattered nation.

In his will, Great-Uncle Kyri had left Toby, Charlie's best friend and Great-Uncle Kyri's adopted son, a duchy and two hundred and fifty million euros—and, more importantly, he had given Lia the man she loved, and Toby the bride of his heart.

Mari sighed in her brother Stavros's arms as they danced beside the bride and groom. If she'd been born on the *other* side of the family, on Uncle Arthur's side, what would she be? To be so close to a life most people could only dream of entering, yet locked behind the permanent barrier of her birth, felt—weird.

Weird described it to a T...but even she, the family dreamer, had no idea if she'd want to be royal. She'd seen both sides of life here, through the eyes of the media and adoring fans who couldn't buy enough magazines about the new royals, and she honestly didn't know if she could take a life filled with intrusions

“I’d like to dance with your sister, if I may.”

A beautifully cultured yet imperious voice broke into Mari’s reverie, and she realised the bridal waltz was done; people were changing partners.

She didn’t need to look around to know who was speaking. She knew the voice of His Royal Highness Prince Mikhail of the small Euro-Asian border kingdom of Chalnikan too well. She’d met him five months before, when he had been Charlie’s groomsman, and she’d been hearing his voice regularly since she’d returned to Hellenia to become Lia’s bridesmaid. She’d had his gifts, his notes, heard his calls—and all the messages were variations on the same theme. *Come and live with me and be my lover.*

How romantic it all sounded...a prince focussing his attentions on her, an ordinary girl...and maybe she’d find it romantic if only he’d meant *come and be my bride*—not *come to my bed for as long as I find you convenient*.

Question: how could most young girls’ fantasy—having the undivided romantic attentions of a handsome young prince—turn into a nightmare?

Answer: if the said prince was an unlikeable, arrogant snob who’d tried to charm Jazmine and Lia, both princesses royal at the time, into marriage. But with Mari he’d only wanted a little fun during his seven days off the parental

leash—in her bed.

And how could Stavros, the most protective of brothers, who'd chased away more men than she could count since she'd turned fourteen, now step back with that look of silent awe?

"What am I supposed to say? He's a *prince*, Mari," Stavros had protested when she'd asked him to protect her.

As she allowed His Spoiled Highness to take her in his arms, her parents beamed. In their eyes, if Charlie could marry a princess and Lia could *become* one, there was no reason a prince of the blood couldn't fall in love with Mari.

"Weren't you crowned Princess of the Festival four times running?" her dad had demanded the first time she'd tried to tell her parents that Mikhail's intentions could never be honourable to her, a commoner.

"Princess of a Greek festival in Marrickville isn't quite the title a real prince looks for in a wife, Dad," Mari had sighed. "And the voting was rigged. Uncle Harry was the president, and Petros's dad was on the board, too."

The entire family knew Stavros's best friend Petros still held a torch for Mari. He'd proposed every year at the Festival since Mari's first win. Her parents had encouraged her to think about it.

At least until Mikhail came along. Even her mother seemed to have waved aside the lifelong belief that marrying a non-Greek was tantamount to heresy the moment she'd looked into Mikhail's melting caramel eyes—or, more strictly, the moment she'd learned his title.

"What was Princess Mary of Denmark before Prince Frederik met her? A girl just like you! The world has changed. You are cousin to a *king*, Mari. Didn't Great-Uncle Kyri teach you the language, customs and manners, just as he did Charlie and Lia?"

"You are worthy of a king...or a future king," her father had said, ending the conversation with the firm tone that told Mari argument was futile.

"You look beautiful, Mari," Mikhail whispered in her ear, holding her a few inches too close for propriety. "Your dress shimmers over your lovely body until you look like a star."

"Thank you, Your Highness," she replied with repellent demureness. As he pulled her against him, she froze so he had as little benefit as possible from the closeness.

"Still so cold?" he asked, with a mixture of the sulky boy and plaintive charmer she couldn't find attractive. "Haven't I given you enough gifts, spent enough time convincing you of my intentions towards you—only you, my sweet star?"

Intentions of what? she almost retorted, but what was the use? He'd only

launch into enthusiastic rhetoric about how life would be for a royal lover: fame, wealth and a jet-setting lifestyle while it lasted, and a nice house in the place of her choosing when he ended it.

The look in those thick-lashed caramel eyes wasn't caring; it was predatory. Though Mikhail was handsome, rich and royal, he didn't like *her*; he enjoyed the chase, and the thrill of the win.

Though she'd told him at least ten times already, she said again, "I love my life in Sydney—and I'd rather be the bride of a common man than a royal mistress." Mari said it with pride. She wasn't asking him to marry her—God forbid! Mikhail's wilful arrogance, spoiled tantrums and treating of the lower orders as if they were disposable had turned her off within two days of meeting him, and now all she felt was a weary revulsion.

Mikhail made a sound of indulgent contempt. "Of course you would. All women want to be a bride. Perhaps if you were titled, like your cousin..." He shrugged elegantly. "Face it, Mari, nobody but your parents expects you to be a virgin when you marry." His eyes gleamed with predatory intent as his hand moved with intimate heat over her back, sliding down towards the curve of her bottom. "Being loved first by a prince will only enhance your chances of finding the right kind of man. Come to me, Mari," he whispered in a voice like chocolate cream, layered with an exotic accent many women would find impossible to resist. "Your life will be blessed from your time with me."

Mari looked at Mikhail and wondered why he still bothered. Even if Jazmine and Lia hadn't told her—strictly on the QT, of course—about the way Mikhail treated any woman he didn't consider his equal in station, and even if Charlie hadn't also warned her that Mikhail refused to acknowledge any of his less important former lovers when they tried to pull the influence card, the simple truth was she didn't *feel* anything for Mikhail, and that ended that.

"No," she said, quiet but firm. "It's not going to happen, Your Highness. Please try to find a more...agreeable woman."

Mikhail's face darkened. He'd taken her other rejections as a prelude, a challenge—but tonight this had to be her final answer. "You're lying, Mari. I've seen the look in your eyes, heard the hesitation in your voice every time you've put me off."

Mari stared at him in wonder. Only a man as self-assured as Mikhail could see her firm *no* just moments before as a "putting off". What would it take to convince him?

After a struggle with his self-control, he went on with dark intimacy, "I can assure you that the King has no objections to my—"

Charlie didn't object? That wasn't what he'd told her...

The name made her turn her head. Charlie and Jazmine danced not far away, and she caught her cousin's wife's eye with a pleading glance.

Jazmine, who'd become the new Queen of Hellenia shortly after her marriage, whispered in her husband's ear. Within seconds Charlie was saying, genially, "Mikhail, my friend, I know a wedding isn't the best time for it, but your father called me this morning. He wishes us to speak on a matter of—" He glanced at Mari, and said apologetically, "Sorry, my beloved cousin, but it's a matter of national security, and some delicacy."

Filled with relief, Mari kissed Charlie's cheek. "Of course. I'll go speak with Jazmine."

Even a prince had protocol to which he must bow. Commoner though he'd been all his life, Charlie was now a station above Mikhail; Hellenia had importance to his family in matters of state and trade in Europe. Mikhail forced a smile to his face. "Lead the way, Your Majesty," he said formally, refusing to call him Charlie.

But perhaps Charlie hadn't yet invited him to such friendly intimacy. For all his careless ways and Aussie upbringing, Charlie had walls and barriers of his own.

As Charlie led Mikhail out of the state banqueting room, Mari knew her freedom wouldn't last long. She had five to ten minutes to escape before Mikhail or her family stopped her. She tossed Jazmine a grateful glance; the Queen winked at her, and tilted her head towards the royal exit. Mari's eyes widened as Jazmine beckoned with a hand.

As she reached her, the Queen slipped her arm through Mari's and led her to the royal exit. Once there she whispered, "Out through there, turn right and right again, and you'll find a royal limousine waiting for you. Your things are packed and ready." Jazmine pushed an envelope stamped with the royal insignia into Mari's hand. "This note tells the driver—he's waiting outside for you—to take you to the pier. Charlie's arranged our smaller yacht for you to sail on for a few days—until Mikhail is safely under the parental thumb again."

"What?" she gasped, too stunned to be polite.

"We might be new at the job, but we keep an eye on things," Jazmine said softly, "and this situation has become rather delicate. I've known Mikhail too many years. There's no way he'll give up until you give him what he wants—or worse, he ends up creating a rupture between Hellenia and Chalnikan. It's been difficult to keep him under control every time he's come here before, but with Lia and me, our positions prevented him from going too far. Even Grandfather refused to think of him as a potential husband for either of us, prince of the blood though he is. I was hoping you could convince him it was useless, but

obviously that isn't going to happen."

Mari found herself blushing again, but she was glad Jazmine hadn't referred to her parents' humiliating approval and interference.

Jazmine pressed her hand. "We hoped we could help you go quietly after the reception, to save everyone embarrassment, but it seems he'll make a scene if he doesn't have his way. He's not used to losing."

Mari had to hold back the tears—and the urge to hug a queen. "Thank you so much, Jazmine...you and Charlie both."

Jazmine smiled. "Thank Lia too, when you can. Mikhail offered her an open marriage after she gave him a few sons. He said she could play around with Toby all she wanted after he had his heirs, and he'd have his women."

Mari smiled and nodded. "Hug her for me, and say I'll call her from home when she and Toby are back."

Jazmine nodded. "Now, go—before he sees where you went. We've told the servants to tell Mikhail nothing of your whereabouts, and the palace gates are to close after you, but he can still order them to open if he sees you. And don't worry about your family," she added as Mari hesitated. "Charlie has it all covered—and he can be quite charming when he wants to."

Without another word, Mari bolted through the doors the liveried servant had opened for her. She slipped off the high, black, strappy heels that probably cost more than a month's wages at home, and kept running. She turned right at the end of the hall, and right again, smiling at the servants in on the secret and whispering her thanks. From experience she knew that she got a lot further with people with a smile than an order. Great-Uncle Kyri always told her she could catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

She burst out into the cool night air with a sigh of relief—the car was there, just where Jazmine had said it would be, and there was a man leaning against the hood with a glass in his hand. Mari ran to the car and jerked the door open before he could move to open it for her. "Take me to the royal pier, please—as fast as you can."

After a moment, the man said, in a tone of amusement, "Of course, my lady." He hopped into the driver's side. "The keys are in the ignition. Everything's in place."

"The King and Queen ordered the car to be ready for me," Mari replied, trying hard to be pleasant while she was literally squirming. "The palace gates will open when we reach them." She flicked a glance at the doors she'd left. Were they about to open? "I'd appreciate it if you'd lock the doors," she said, mindful not to be imperious or cold. "Please," she added again, turning to the rearview mirror to smile at the man. "Please, I really need to leave now."

After a bare second of hesitation the man started the engine, gunned it, and let it go. Then they were at the gates, which opened smoothly for them. Mari sat twitching in the back seat, tossing constant glances over her shoulder—

Nothing yet, thank heaven, but he could come at any second. Charlie's gentle, hands-off approach with Mikhail told her how delicate this situation was. It looked as if things might get ugly if she refused him again. Who'd ever have thought ordinary Mari Mitsialos could become entangled in international relations? But this was a kind of importance she'd give anything to not know! "Faster, oh, please go faster," she pleaded, worst-case scenarios running riot through her head.

A smothered sound like a laugh met her desperate plea, but the limo moved through the gates. As Jazmine had stated they would, they swung closed behind the limo.

Flashes popped as the paparazzi assumed it was the bride and groom. She cringed away from the lights, covering her face; then they were through the thronged crowds. The boom gates and road spikes placed at the end of the private road, for royal safety in case of war, did the job on their pursuit, stopping the cars and bursting the tyres of the motorbikes. There'd be an official apology later, and talk of accidents, no doubt—and in the meantime the royal limo headed at breakneck speed for the royal pier.

CHAPTER TWO

AS HE drove for the royal pier, the note from the King and Queen of Hellenia lying open by his side, Lysander Marsalis wondered when would be the best time to tell her that he wasn't really a chauffeur, but a duke, with distant ties to the royal family...

The eleventh Duke of Persolis since his brother's retirement to a monastery a year ago, and a royal diplomat for the past decade, Sander was the current minder of the spoiled Royal Highness from whom the King's cousin was currently bolting. He'd been sanctioned by both the King and Queen to discreetly take the girl out of a situation fraught with a hundred potential landmines in the way of international diplomacy.

At the very least he was going to lose his position in Chalnikan for acting against Mikhail's interests—but having been given the orders by both Mikhail's father and Charlie, what else could he do?

“Can’t we go any faster...please?”

A grin tugged at reluctant lips. The *please*, like all the others, had been so obviously tacked on as an afterthought. “Not without being arrested, miss.”

“Oh.” She slumped in her seat. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble.”

The grin vanished. The girl...Mari...really was worried—and yet she took the time to be concerned about his position as well. She was a nice young woman, far too sweet and innocent for an infamous playboy prince only after some fun. “Not much longer, miss. In perhaps ten minutes we’ll arrive safely.”

Relief rose in her face like the morning sun, until all of her seemed to glow. “Oh, *thank* you. I must seem like a drama queen, but I *really* need to get away.”

In the space of ten minutes Sander had begun to feel as if he was living on a roller coaster. This girl really lived on her emotions. “Was the wedding so bad, miss?”

She rolled her eyes. “You have *no* idea.”

He strongly suspected the title “drama queen” wasn’t entirely incorrect. Mari Mitsialos, with her mercurial and vivid emotions rushing across her face like movie panels, was a refreshing change from the languid debutantes and elegantly bored nobles’ daughters paraded in royal company every year. Every thought and

feeling showed on her face, like sunshine bursting through clouds. She was just...cute.

It was obvious she wasn't born to privilege. In high-society circles one never snapped at underlings; one merely conveyed the impression that disobedience to the slightest whim wasn't an option. But Mari had a cute little wobble in her voice that gave her away. *Please, I need you to do what I want, because I'm so scared you won't, and I'll have no idea what to do then...* With a little training, she could be—

"It's all right, miss, no one's following us," Sander said in a soothing tone as he saw her twist around to stare through the rear window for at least the twelfth time.

"Ooooh...that's good. *Thank* you." The girl leaned back against the plush, butter-soft leather, and smiled into the rear vision mirror at him. "Honestly, you have *no* idea what it was like in there."

The smile lit her face—in fact, it lit the entire car with inner sunshine. Despite her apparent addiction to italicising a word in almost every sentence, Mari Mitsialos was pretty, with long dark curls and sleepy eyes similar to her cousin the Princess Giulia—but when she smiled she was...well, *dazzling*.

That smile was lethal. Not that she had dimples or perfect teeth—he couldn't put his finger on what it was. But whatever it was Mari had, she had it in spades. The *It* factor.

He'd known that from the day of Charlie and Jazmine's wedding. Seeing her dancing at the reception, he'd known Mari was unusual. From a shadowed corner he'd watched her laugh and smile and charm every man between fifteen and ninety-five into adoration without even trying. She was...well, lovable.

All of which meant he'd kept a serious distance. Mari was a nice girl, not one for a few nights' fun or discreet liaisons in designated places. And she was the King's cousin.

He had to remember to keep his face stolid, like a servant, as he answered. "I'd have thought a royal wedding with this new royal family would be a lovely affair, miss. You've been to both weddings, if I remember rightly?"

He put a tiny hint of question into the observation, leaving the way free for her to talk if she wanted to. It was obvious she was bursting to say something, to relieve the pressure somehow. Unfortunately her immediate family seemed oblivious to Mikhail's true intent, and pushed her into his arms at every opportunity. Poor girl... He'd noticed—

Don't think about it, Sander. He had to keep the King and Queen of Hellenia on side. He needed to come out of this madcap experience with some kind of credibility, and that meant a strictly *hands-off* policy.

“Yes, I was at both weddings. I’m first cousin to both Charlie, um, King Kyriacos, and Lia, I mean Princess Giulia,” she replied, with a quiet touch of pride that made Sander squelch another smile. Well, why shouldn’t she be proud? From obscurity to the cousin of royalty was a leap in status most people could only dream of.

“The King, the Prince and Princess have brought a breath of fresh air to the nation,” he offered, to see what she’d say next.

“Yes—and it was needed, from what I can see.” Though she spoke without rancour, he felt a touch of defensiveness. She probably thought he was one of the old King’s supporters, wanting to keep the almost medieval status quo.

“Their knowledge of the common people seems to have reinvigorated the country. They’ve done a lot already in putting Lord Orakis at odds with the people,” he said.

“He can never return after the arson investigation. That was down to Toby—the new Prince. Toby’s one of the original good guys. He saved Lia’s life, years ago—and he risked his life in that burning building to prove Orakis’s guilt. He did that to save Lia. He would do anything to make Lia happy—*anything*.”

Ah, there it was again, the tiny, wistful note. Sander knew then why Mikhail’s chase had been fruitless from the start. The extreme romance of the two royal weddings in the Hellenican royal family had infected many a woman around the world, but to be the cousin of the new royalty in love...well, why shouldn’t she hold out for real love and a wedding?

“They seem very happy in the pictures I’ve seen, miss.”

“They’ve always loved each other. The whole family have been waiting for them to get together for years.” The yearning grew in her voice, misted her milk-chocolate eyes, and her smile was...well, *luminous*—

Beep!

At the indignant honking behind, Sander pulled himself together and looked at the road ahead with fixed determination. He’d known the deal when he took on the position of the Prince’s Private Secretary. The King planned on abdicating as soon as Mikhail proved himself worthy. It was Sander’s job to get him to that destination on an express train. Taking Mari on a yacht was saving Mikhail from the worst *faux pas* he could make. It was *not* for personal pleasure, no matter how much he derived from merely looking at her.

He was on an excellent wicket with this job, and Charlie and Jazmine had offered him the ripe plum of being Hellenican Representative to the UN if he handled it right. No way was he about to risk his career, no matter how pretty or tempting Mari Mitsialos happened to be.

“Sorry about that, miss,” he said woodenly, and, after answering her

reassurances with dogged politeness and no curiosity, he kept his gaze ahead with absolute determination.

Boy, they really have gorgeous chauffeurs here...

Despite his sudden Pinocchio face, Mari couldn't help staring in the rear vision mirror at him. His eyes were almost as green as those she'd seen in the stained-glass windows at the church today, and they *danced*. His dimples seemed grooved from the deepest part of his skin, warming a mouth full and carved from Michelangelo's imagination. Warm honey-brown skin, strong features, a voice of smooth, dark temptation, and an accent that was half-Mediterranean and half-Oxford—oh, what wasn't to like? A Greek god sat in front of her, seemingly risen from the sea on Neptune's trident. Oooh, to see him rise from the water, droplets of Mediterranean-Aegean running down his body...

"KING'S COUSIN RUNS OFF WITH CHAUFFEUR!"

After all Charlie and Lia had done for her family, both before and after their elevation to royalty, could she make a mockery of the new Marandis Royal Family by feeding the paparazzi machine for months on end? No, family came first. Charlie and Lia needed them all to behave with strict propriety. Running away with gorgeous chauffeurs was absolutely in the realms of fantasy.

And he could be married for all you know, with five kids. And even if he was single, and you did know his name, he hasn't once even smiled at you.

She turned her gaze out of the window, to where the aqua-marine Aegean sparkled all along the coast road. Why was it that the men she found irresistible never looked at her, and all the nice guys she found so boring hung around in droves?

Yet when she'd been confronted with the kind of man she'd always dreamed of attracting, she'd discovered the difference between dream and reality—and she'd realised what a big, old-fashioned, one hundred percent hypocrite she was! What she wanted was a good man to fall to his knees with a big fat diamond, his family lined up behind him in adoring approval of her.

But hey, it hurt nobody to dream, right? And if that daydream face had shifted subtly, so it now had deep-grooved dimples, eyes that sparkled like the ocean in sunlight and a smile that made her heart flutter, what did it matter?

"What do they *all* matter? Line up, fantasy number four hundred and thirty-seven," she muttered in disgust—and then realised she'd said it aloud. She peered at the driver's face again, and blushed when those dancing-in-the-waves eyes met hers, his deliciously masculine mouth quivering to hold in a smile. "Sorry," she said, with a rueful sigh. What was the point in being embarrassed?

“I know—talking to myself is a bad habit.”

“It’s said all the world’s geniuses talk to themselves,” the driver said gravely enough, his eyes still twinkling.

“Thanks, but you don’t believe I’m in their number any more than I do.” She shrugged and laughed, her hands lifting in mock-surrender. “But I haven’t hurt anyone yet.”

“I’m glad of that, miss,” he replied, with such fervour she laughed again.

“My name’s Mari,” she offered, putting out her hand, hoping to hear his name in return.

After a visible hesitation, he said, “I’m Lysander, miss.”

Though feeling the sting of the untaken hand, Mari felt her brow lift. “So you’re named for the famed general and friend of Cyrus, the conquering prince of Persia. Your parents gave you a lot to live up to,” she said, grinning.

Lysander’s mouth twitched again—then the wooden demeanour returned as he pulled off the road and rolled up smoothly to a guarded gate.

The guard stepped out of the small guardhouse, frowning at Lysander. Lysander produced the Queen’s letter, and after a moment the man nodded and returned inside.

The car moved through the gate, and it closed behind them. The yacht Jazmine had called *small* was enormous, at least two hundred feet—which begged the question: what size was the *big* yacht? —and, judging by the appointments on the outside, absolutely oozed luxury. It bobbed in the calm waters before her in a silent siren call. *Come and play...*

Playing wasn’t on the agenda. All she needed to do was to get on board safely, spend a few days there until Mikhail left Hellenia, then she could return to her safe, anonymous life.

“Hurry, oh, please hurry,” she murmured, feeling urgency grab hold of her.

In answer, Lysander murmured quiet words into an intercom-style phone—and she saw the gangplank move and a larger one take its place a level down. It was wide enough for a car...and a dark, gaping hole had opened high up in the yacht.

Lysander drove into the yacht’s hull, and blessed cool darkness filled the car, like a benediction of safety.

“Thank you, Lysander,” she breathed as the hole closed up behind them and she heard the engines start up. “Please, let’s take off—push off—whatever it is boats do.”

She heard a choked-off sound as he opened his door and came around to open hers. In the darkness, his face glowed in the subdued lighting of the limo—and she saw he was laughing. It didn’t matter if his lips were under total control,

his dimples danced, just as his eyes did—and the combination fascinated her. “Aye, aye, Miss Mari. I’ll go to the Captain right away and convey your orders to him.”

She felt intense relief fill her. “So you’re coming with me?” And she was *not* thinking of having his company for the next few days—just the fact that she wouldn’t be alone.

His eyes darkened as the laughter died. “The Queen’s letter makes it perfectly clear—I’m to look after you.” The slight bow of his head was touched with respect and filled with irony. “So until my orders change, Miss Mitsialos, your wish is my command.”

CHAPTER THREE

SANDER wasn't sure he liked that speculative, wistful gleam in Mari's milk-chocolate eyes. He felt like the genie must have when telling Aladdin he had three wishes...and, judging by the way she kept looking at him, brimming and overflowing with innocent fascination, he couldn't help but know what one wish would be.

He hadn't seen a woman look at him with such honest admiration and shy appraisal since he'd become Duke. Yes, women had found him attractive since he'd shot up past the six-foot mark when he was fifteen, but the way Mari blushed when she looked and smiled at him, and when she looked away, and the light in those sweet, dreaming eyes...

But the only kind of women he'd bothered with over the past ten years played the game, and it was glaringly obvious Mari was a straight-shooter, a nice girl to take home to Mother...if only Mother didn't expect her to have a heralded pedigree.

He forced himself to remain expressionless as he handed her out of the limo. "Would you come up on deck for a few moments while I give orders to the Captain, miss? Then I'll see you to the Stateroom."

The dreaming fantasy in her eyes vanished as if he'd smacked her. "The...? Isn't that the room reserved for royalty?"

Amused by her wide-eyed near-shock, he nodded. "That's right, miss."

Expecting her to breathe a few words of ecstatic agreement, he was taken aback when she said, "But that belongs to Charlie and Jazmine."

Touched by her anxiety to do the right thing, when most of the women he knew would probably have shoved him to the ground in their race to sleep in the King's bed, he showed her Jazmine's note. He hoped she didn't notice that he was carefully covering the "*Dear Sander*" at the start of the royal instructions with his thumb. "The Queen's instructions are clear, miss. You're family to royalty now. Whenever you stay with them, you'll live as they do."

Mari read the note, eyes still wide, but then she shook her head. "It's so nice of Jazmine to offer, but I'll be more than happy in one of the guestrooms. Just so long as we push off soon," she added with an endearing nervous nibble at her lip and a glance around the darkened cargo hold, as if expecting Mikhail to pop out

of a shadowy corner any second.

Knowing that tone well—his mother spoke just like that when she was determined to have her way—Sander didn’t bother arguing as he lifted her bags out of the trunk. He’d just put her bags in the Stateroom, and let her awe and pride do the rest. “Ready?” He was surprised to find he was enjoying the novel experience of playing employee to a commoner.

She nodded. “Definitely. The sooner the better.” She headed for the lit door marked Exit in a form of Koi Greek rare outside of Hellenia, but close enough to read.

He only realised then that Mari had been speaking Hellenican Greek the whole time—and so had he. It had been that easy with her, so natural he hadn’t noticed.

Alarm bells went off in his head. What was it about Mari that drew princes and dukes to her like compasses to the north, when she wasn’t even trying?

An hour later, Mari stood on the deck of the yacht, watching the harbour recede from view. Her sigh was heartfelt when she saw no yacht or chopper racing to catch them.

A soft tingling at her neck told her Lysander was nearby, watching her.

How she knew, she had no idea. He had that effect on her; all the denial in the world wouldn’t change it. She found him—well, gorgeous. It didn’t mean anything would happen.

She turned with a smile that felt forced on her lips. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” She waved around at the harbour, at the beaches and cliffs of the coast, and the yachts and little fishing vessels bobbing in the water.

He watched her with the same forced politeness he’d had on his face for hours. His gaze remained on her face, not sweeping over her changed attire: cargo shorts and a pretty just-on-the-shoulder rose-pink jersey shirt, tied in at the waist, flip-flops on her feet. “I’ve always thought this part of the world fairly stunning,” he agreed, adding with belated subservience, “miss.”

Absurdly disappointed that her best casual summer outfit hadn’t brought the boy out of Pinocchio, she turned back. “Have you travelled much?”

“A little, miss.”

“Have you been to Sydney?” she went on doggedly, determined to find some common ground with her only companion for the next few days—and she’d only been to Sydney and Greece until now.

“Once. I’ve been to Sydney, to Canberra, and on a day-trip to the Blue Mountains. Its beauty is very different to here.”

A tiny smile curved her mouth. “It’s wilder,” she agreed, “especially in the national parks and the beaches. Here, everything feels—civilised.”

“Tamed, you mean?”

Her head tilted as she thought about it. “It seems that way, I suppose. But it feels like a sham. Like the calm before a storm. You feel the sense of all the things that have happened here, all the history and wars, and you know it’s just a breath away from happening again.”

“That’s very perceptive of you,” he added, with a half-surprised inflection. “Life has been like that here for a long time.” Which was why Charlie and Jazmine’s more relaxed rule was like summer wine on an overheated day, and why almost everyone loved them already.

She shrugged. “My cousins have to have people to talk to sometimes. Being what they are now is pretty overwhelming. In a year they’ve had to learn so much, change completely, and understand their new world while making life-altering decisions. It helps to speak to people who love them, who’ll keep their confidence—and who know them from the time when they used to be just like us.”

Lysander joined her at the rail at last; but the tingling didn’t abate, and she had to control the urge to move away. It wasn’t his fault that she couldn’t—that she wanted—

“Do they miss their old lives?” he asked, in such an ordinary voice that she felt another spurt of guilt. Lost in the confusion his nearness engendered, she hesitated a moment too long, and he went on quietly, “I understand, miss. You don’t know me.”

“The Queen trusts you,” she said, wishing *she* had reason to trust him. Just because she was attracted to him it didn’t mean she could spill royal secrets. “How would you feel if you suddenly found out your whole life had been a lie, that the person you loved best in the world wasn’t what you thought he was? Great-Uncle Kyri gave them a safe rug all their lives, and then pulled it out from under them after he died.”

He turned his head and looked at her with those *alive* eyes of his, and again she had the feeling she’d surprised him—like with her decision not to sleep in the Stateroom. “Most people would probably toss their old lives without thought to become a king and a princess, and inherit all they have.”

Her mouth pursed into a half-smile. “I don’t agree with that. Most people put family first—at least all the people I know. Our family’s always worked hard for what we have, but how does money or position replace the bonds of love and family?”

“Is that how you feel?”

The question had a curious feel to it, as if beneath the stolid demeanour he wanted to know the answer—to know something about her.

What was it about this man that caught her off guard?

“Yes,” she said eventually, thinking of Prince Mikhail, of Charlie and Lia’s struggle to get everything right. “I don’t think life in the public eye is for me—and I’m definitely not made for it, either,” she added with a glimmering smile.

“And the power? Is the thought of rising in the world—the glamour, the titles—appealing to you?” he asked, and she had the curious belief he was pressing her, really wanting to know how she felt about it.

She tried to think of something clever and subtle to say, but she just didn’t have that in her nature. “I can’t answer for Charlie and Lia, but I don’t think any amount of power or wealth could make up for living under a microscope.” Indeed, that sense of always being watched was the thing that had convinced her that the reality of Charlie and Lia’s new life was far from the dream she’d imagined when she’d first heard the news through the international media. The fact that their courtships, their royal training had all been conducted under such intense scrutiny—well, all she knew was *she* couldn’t have taken it. “I like my privacy—the right to fail at something without the whole world knowing about it.”

Lysander was very still. His hands gripped the rail. “You don’t think you would—?” Whatever he’d been about to ask, he obviously thought better of it, for then he said, in a lighter tone, “I guess for those of us who haven’t lived with it, it would be rather a culture shock.”

“You could say that,” she agreed fervently, remembering the first time the cameras had flashed in her face and a clamour of voices had yelled, “How does it feel to be cousin to royalty?”

“I suppose the reality of joining the Beautiful People isn’t what most dream it would be,” he said, with a thoughtful lilt at the end, like a question.

She shrugged. “Probably being born to it might make a difference. I wouldn’t know.” She turned her face again, smiling at him to lighten the intensity she felt in him.

He didn’t smile back, barely even glanced at her. After a moment, he said, “Neither of us will ever know, miss.” The words held that same hidden sense of thoughts held back.

There it was again—that “miss”, like an intrusion into what was a semi-intimate conversation for such new acquaintances. And his word-choice and his accent—were all royal chauffeurs so well-educated?

“Do you think you could call me Mari, since we’re going to be shipmates for the next few days?” she asked, with a wistful note that made her squirm with

embarrassment.

"It's best to keep things as they are, miss," he replied, without missing a beat.

Mari felt herself freeze. "All right." She spoke from a cool distance. If he wanted to remain the chilly chauffeur, let him have his way. "Feel free to do whatever it is chauffeurs do on board yachts. I'll take a walk on deck before dinner." She waved him off, needing distance from him. If these were the rules, she'd play by them. The faster she could dismiss his smiling face from her ledger of unattainable fantasies, the better.

He ducked his head in a small bow that smacked as much of irony as it did respect. "Enjoy your walk, miss."

And then he was gone.

During the next half-hour, before she needed to change for dinner, Mari discovered the meaning of the grand term *solitary splendour*—and she also discovered she didn't like it a bit.

And it was all Lysander's fault.

He'd hurt her feelings.

From his table in the secondary dining room, where he'd elected to dine, Sander watched her eating alone in state in the royal dining room. Pretty and fresh in a floral print dress, with her curls falling from a loose clip at her nape, she looked small and lonely. She was barely eating, even though the food was superb. She kept her face averted from where he sat, trying to catch her eye, to make her smile as she had this afternoon, and he knew her eyes shimmered with tears she was trying to control.

Guilt ate at him. Gregarious and impulsive by nature, Mari was a sweet extrovert who needed company and friendship to make her shine. Protocol dictated that he was the only one she could talk to here. The King's cousins couldn't make friends with the staff on the yacht in case it embarrassed the royal family. He'd known that all along. Yet when she'd offered her friendship he'd played the wooden chauffeur, blocking her off. He'd put distance between them because he knew she was attracted to him...because she was dangerous to his peace of mind.

She'd offered friendship without reservation, and he'd left her humiliated and alone because he wanted her even more than Mikhail did—had done since he'd first seen her. Her birth held him back—more because she was Charlie's cousin than because she wasn't good enough. She had the power to destroy him without even trying—and he could only ruin her.

But none of this absurd situation was her fault. She couldn't help being... well, lovable...and it was no fault of hers that she was totally ill-equipped for his life.

He had to make this right. He'd lower himself to a position where she could retaliate...or, if he was really lucky, forgive him. Eventually.

Taking his plate, he walked through the sliding glass doors to where she sat, and took the place opposite her. She whirled around to look at him, her eyes wide, startled—and, yes, shimmering with tears unshed.

Though she didn't exactly seem welcoming, she was so *pretty* he gritted his teeth before he forced a smile. *It's not her fault she could break my career and cause international rifts between nations, with potential repercussions for one small, unimportant duchy on the edge of Hellenia.*

"I'm sorry I said what I did this afternoon," he said, in true sincerity. "Can we start over? I'm Lysander—but my friends call me Sander." He put out a hand.

After a visible hesitation, she nodded and took his hand in hers. "Hello. I'm Mari."

She withdrew her hand the moment he slackened his hold. Looking down, she applied herself to food that by now had to be even colder and less appetising than his.

"Pleased to meet you, Mari," he said warmly, angling for her smile.

A brief, beautiful blaze of light hit Sander in the solar plexus as she smiled at him, but then it vanished. She sat opposite him at the table, only inches away, yet she appeared distant, like a shooting star flown out of reach.

"You too."

He noticed she didn't use his name. Disappointment streaked through him, but he knew she was only playing the game by the rules he'd set for them.

"You know you can send the plate back and ask for fresh?" he commented, when her face took on a stoic expression as she chewed her food.

She shook her head. "I've worked as a chef's assistant in a Thai restaurant," she said, showing him her working-class background without shame or embarrassment. "I won't give this chef extra work because I didn't eat when the food was hot."

"Did you eat too much at the wedding?" he asked, smiling.

Slowly, as if drawn, her eyes lifted from their determined gaze on her plate, and she looked at his mouth. A hard thrill ran through him at the half-shy wonder—then she looked in his eyes. Her brows drew together and she shrugged.

A spurt of irritation shot through him. "How much you ate today is hardly a state secret."

Her hands fluttered up and fell back to her lap. "I don't know who you are,"

she said simply. The words carried a double meaning that a trained diplomat couldn't miss...and he was in the danger zone. If she knew—

Still he couldn't keep his mouth closed. "You think I'm the media in disguise?" he asked, to get her to talk.

She shrugged again. "The Queen trusts you, so she must have had you security-cleared. If you're media you're in deep cover. And the way you speak—well, you sound like Prince William, or someone like that."

Sander felt his heart pounding too fast. It was coming, and he couldn't stop it. "You sound like a thriller writer," he teased, to divert her from the logical conclusion.

"You're not just a chauffeur, are you?"

There it was—the question he'd been expecting for hours and half-dreaded. He had instructions from the King and Queen, and he wondered at his curious reluctance as he said, "No, I'm not. I'm in the Royal Hellenican Diplomatic Corps."

She nodded, as if expecting that. "I thought it might be something like that. Only titled men and women can enter the Corps in Hellenia."

He kept the sigh inside. There went any chance to be anonymous, to just enjoy each other's company for a few days, man to woman, without titles and wealth getting in the way. "I'm the brother of the tenth Duke of Persolis. I was Lord Limontis."

"You *were* Lord Limontis?" she asked, too languidly for him to call it jumping on the past tense, yet she hadn't wasted time.

"My brother abdicated last year to become a monk," he said, refusing to look at her. It was strange—such an intimate conversation, yet neither one looking at the other.

After a couple of moments in which neither of them moved, she spoke. "So, then, since you're no longer Lord Limontis—does that make you the eleventh Duke?"

An even longer moment before he answered. "Yes."

Mari pushed her plate away. Her gaze was on the exquisite candelabra to his right. "If you're a diplomat, you must have been assigned to help me. You know exactly what's been going on."

She sounded so tense. A small corner of pity touched him. "Yes."

"My thanks are unnecessary, since you were doing your job...but I do thank you, Your Grace. And your decision to maintain distance from me makes perfect sense." Her chair scraped back, and she stood. Her face averted, she lifted a hand in negation as he jumped to his feet with instinctive good manners. "Please enjoy your meal. I'm tired. Good night."

“Please, Mari, it wasn’t like that. Won’t you listen for a few minutes?” he asked in low, pleading tones he’d long ago learned melted the hardest of feminine hearts.

But Mari shook her head yet again, her frown deeper, as if he’d offended her. “It’s been quite a long day for me, Your Grace, so if you’ll excuse me—?”

The distance between them was growing by the nanosecond—and when it was Mari creating the abyss, he really didn’t like it. “Please don’t call me by that title. I told you—my name’s Sander. ‘Your Grace’ reminds me of my father, or my brother,” he added, trying to make her relax in his company. “I wasn’t brought up to be the Duke. I was the spare heir who fell into the title when Konstantinos’s lifelong love of the Church led him to a monastery.”

Slow-burning eyes looked into his then. “Would you have told me that—or asked me to call you by name—if I wasn’t cousin to a king? Would you be so friendly to a commoner from Sydney?”

The question made him flush. “We’d never have met if you weren’t cousin to a king,” he said, and it sounded more pompous than he’d meant it to be.

“Exactly.”

Strange, but when he looked at her he saw only acceptance of his snobbery. “Mari—”

“I think you’re right,” she said very softly. “It’s best if we maintain distance.”

Sander’s mind scrabbled through options as he tried to work out how the situation had unravelled so fast. Where had all his tact gone—all the effortless charm, the light-handed control of all matters—that led kings and princes to trust his judgement?

The trouble was he wasn’t used to dealing with people other than high-maintenance hyperactive politicians or languid members of born aristocracy. Mari belonged to neither class, and she was her own woman with her own set of values and a deep core of strength.

“I should have known things would end this way tonight when you moved your bags out of the Stateroom,” he muttered.

“Twice,” was her only comment, and his gaze flew to her like metal particles to a magnet when he heard the gentle laugh.

He raised his brows. She’d also refused the services of the maid, much to that lady’s intense disappointment. “You moved your entire wardrobe back to the guestroom?”

She lifted a shoulder and grinned. “Only the clothes that were already mine—and it’s only a walk across the hall.”

“And down about sixty feet,” he retorted, enjoying the banter.

“I told you it wasn’t my place to be there.” When he didn’t answer, her grin grew. “You’re not alone in underestimating me, Your Grace. You’ll soon understand that when I say something, I mean it. My parents always say I’m too stubborn for my own good.” Her voice held sweet empathy turned against herself in bubbling mirth, and he had to gulp down a physical longing to move closer to her, to drink in that happiness by osmosis. “Um, Your Grace...” she added, a much-later afterthought, spoken in impish fun, as he’d done by calling her “miss” today, and he found himself laughing with her.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re going to be harder work than—than any king or queen I’ve served?” he finished smoothly, almost saying *Prince Mikhail*.

“Perhaps, but in a totally different way than you’d be used to.” Her voice was like champagne, filled with floating bubbles.

“I work for your cousins, too,” he reminded her, but he knew his face gave away his laughter. He might have a good poker face, but people always said his eyes were like Pinocchio’s nose—always betraying him.

Did they show how much he ached to touch her, to feel her skin and drink in the sunshine she seemed to carry around in her pocket? Were his eyes telling her that his thoughts were every bit as lustful as Mikhail’s, yet somehow far more... personal, yearning?

“If you’re the Duke, why are you still working as a diplomat? Don’t you have a dukedom to run or something?”

The question took him by surprise, and he answered without thought. “A duchy—yes, I do. In another year or so I’ll retire from my work and do my duty by my people.”

“Returning to lay down the law and make them all obey?” She laughed.

“Not quite. I’ll return to Persolis from my post, marry a suitably well-bred young lady, produce heirs and let my mother retire at last,” he drawled, a little offended by her assumption that he’d rule with a fist of iron. He was a *diplomat*. He knew how to make people do as he wanted while allowing them to think it was all their own idea.

All people, that was, except this mercurial young woman, with her original ideas and unshakable stubbornness. Had he met his Nemesis—his Daughter of Night?

“Yes, I’m sure all the well-bred girls will be lining up for the opportunity, Your Grace.”

Startled anew, Sander frowned at her—then he realised what he’d said, the unintentional insult in retaliation for her little joke. He cursed his unaccountable lack of tact and his empty mind, not knowing what to say next.

Was there a handbook on how to treat an ordinary young woman with higher

moral standards than the Prince he worked for?

A slight swish of air whispered by his cheek, and Sander knew that while he'd been lost in thought Mari had left the room without a sound.

CHAPTER FOUR

“ONE fantasy is now fulfilled,” Mari sighed as she stood on deck the next morning, the wind in her hair and the sunshine kissing her skin.

“What’s that?”

She controlled her jumpy reaction to Lysander’s closeness. “This has been a dream of mine since I was a girl.” Keeping her gaze on the surreal beauty off the yacht, she waved around at the intense aqua of the water, dotted with islands straight from her childhood bedtime stories. “All my life I’ve daydreamed about *this*.” She patted the rail and sighed. “I mean, who doesn’t dream of being on a yacht in the Aegean Sea, island-hopping and seeing the playground of the old gods?”

“Every time I come here I feel the same. Like it’s a dream.” He leaned beside her at the rail. A glorious male scent, reminiscent of ocean and deep forest and...Lysander...wafted to her. She breathed it in, and a vision of his face filled her head.

How ridiculous was it that she was mooning over a man who was standing right beside her, a man working at being close to her? But the inches separating them were like the abyss off Santorini’s cliffs—deadly dangerous to the unskilled...

“I think I’ll be homesick for here when I go back—though Australia’s always been home,” she said softly, watching an albatross soaring over them with minimal effort.

“You’re not tempted to stay?”

The question held that odd intensity again—and suddenly she knew what he was hiding: he was attracted to her, too. A thrill ran through her, but she had to hold it in. “I can’t afford to be.” She frowned at the island they were passing, so beautiful with its whitewashed stone houses and steep cobbled roads. “This is Charlie and Lia’s life. I don’t belong here. It’s borrowed time for me—a fantasy world only few can live in every day.”

“Charlie and Jazmine are very family-orientated. You’d be welcome.”

“Don’t you see that’s exactly why I couldn’t stay?” Was her voice wobbling with the yearning to take the hand of temptation being held out to her? Right now she didn’t know which tempted her most: the country, the family or the

luscious man beside her—a creation from the imagination of the gods, with an unspoken empathy that...that— “They already have too many people taking advantage of their closeness to the commoner King and Princess.”

“Do you mean the plane sent for the firemen to come over? Sending the royal jet to bring family for the wedding? I doubt anyone believes they took advantage.”

Mari slanted him a look filled with irony. “You’re born to this life, Your Grace. You go home to a palace probably not far removed from the Summer Palace. You were born in Persolis, which is part of Hellenia. It’s easy to leave knowing you’ll go back. You have no idea how the temptation to never leave grabs hold of me here.” She laid a hand over her heart. “This land—in hours it felt like part of who I am, as if I belong here. But I don’t.”

“Actually, I was born in Paris,” he said quietly, “but I know what you mean. I do take it for granted now. But ten years ago, when I joined the Diplomatic Corps, Hellenia was at war with itself. I was glad to be posted elsewhere and leave the high-pressure decisions to my father, and then my brother.” Low, he added, “Then Father died, Konstantinos renounced his position to become a monk—and I became Duke.”

All he hadn’t said played in her mind like a re-run of the last scene of *Casablanca*: the impossible decision facing a young man who’d never seen the choice coming. A new, reluctant duke in a nation with divided loyalties, and a royal family imploding. No wonder Sander had decided to remain a diplomat when he’d become Duke.

“I’m sorry.” She laid a hand over his for a moment, her eyes shimmering with pity for a man born to more wealth and privilege than she’d ever have. “It must have been so hard. Is— Was your duchy...damaged?”

“Yes.” He spoke in a strange blend of remoteness and warmth, as if an internal war raged in him and he couldn’t decide how to feel. “My brother left as the war ended, and I inherited a duchy in a shambles. I stayed on in the Corps in order to create ties to nations that could help us in the long term.”

Feeling intense curiosity and sympathy mingled, she asked, “Then who—?”

“My mother agreed to handle my duties for a year or so while I finish my tenure and—and learn the minutiae of being Duke. My brother and I talk for an hour at night. His abbot allows him that much speaking for the good of the nation,” he added with a wryness she couldn’t describe. “If I can combine both duties for a few years, perhaps rise to Ambassador, it can only do my people good.”

Mari understood far more than he’d said. She’d been the one Charlie and Lia had talked to when she’d arrived for both royal weddings. She’d heard stories of

the hardship as well as privilege. “I saw the effect on Charlie when he lost his parents and Great-Uncle Kyri. It would have been just the same for him if he’d been here, if he’d been King.” Wanting to give him comfort, she smiled at him and squeezed the hand she still held. “Love and grief are the same in any class of humanity—hard decisions, too.”

“Except that our decisions affect more people than our families alone.” He turned to her with that dark intensity that fascinated her. His eyes could dance or create a tempest in the ocean, as they did now. “Your great-uncle’s decision sent our nation into over twenty years of war, and still he never came back, nor told his family who he was.”

Mari couldn’t answer that. It was too hard to reconcile the loving, giving old man she’d known with the one who’d created a war and done nothing to end it. “And your decision to remain a diplomat—who else does *that* affect?”

Lysander’s face darkened still more. “I’d say the same amount of people that my brother’s decision to enter a monastery did—no, one less, because his decision surely changed *my* life.”

She tilted her head, studying him. The unplumbed depths of this man fascinated her. For a duke, a man with wealth and privilege, he seemed so—alone. “Your decision has obviously affected your mother.”

He turned on her, stepping an inch too close in his passionate denial. “You think what Konstantinos did didn’t affect her? I wasn’t *trained* to be the Duke. I was the spare—the one destined for the Navy, the Air Force or the priesthood. Everyone says Konstantinos’s decision was a noble one. I was supposed to step in and act like I was always meant to be the Duke. But I wasn’t born for it. My brother never asked me how I felt about it until he was safely installed in his peaceful life inside the monastery.”

Her breathing shifted; she willed her heart to slow its racing at the masculine heat only inches from her. *How can anyone find this man a disappointment?* her mind screamed. Standing this close to him, she certainly couldn’t find a single fault. “Maybe he was afraid to ask, because then he’d have felt too guilty to go where he knew he belonged.”

Slowly the storm clouds faded in his eyes; he stared at her and shook his head, but didn’t speak.

“Maybe he had more faith in you than you do in yourself,” she added gently. “Maybe he knew in his heart he wasn’t meant to be the Duke, but you were.”

His frown intensified, but it wasn’t frightening. “He always loved the Church—the rituals and the chanting.” A smile glimmered. “It only ever put me to sleep.”

She gave him a lilting smile. “So we do have something in common—a lack

of interest in the Church. My parents think I'm the next best thing to a heathen because I crash when they start droning in the old Greek."

His whole face came alive as he threw back his head and laughed. "Droning—I love it. I always start yawning within seconds."

Mari stared at his smiling mouth, fascinated beyond decency, aching to move closer, to touch her fingers to the living beauty of his face, the warmth of his skin. "And don't talk to me about the incense. Our church was small, but they used enough sandalwood for a cathedral."

His grin was the splitting-face variety of a man who'd found a soul mate at last. "I always felt the urge to bring a breathing apparatus."

She laughed, wondering if he felt a tenth of the violent need to touch that she did. She'd never become so enthralled with a man so fast before. He was like—dangerous magic.

"Are your parents disappointed in you now?" he asked, racking up the conversation another notch in intimacy.

She sighed and nodded. "They think Mikhail will marry me because of Charlie. Why shouldn't their daughter become a princess?" Her eyes met his, and she immediately wished they hadn't, because the mixture of mirth and empathy was—compelling. "I don't know if your parents have the same need to brag about their children as mine do, but in their minds I'm denying them the opportunity to have a royal daughter. They seem to think I deserve it."

Lysander's gaze softened as he looked down at her. "Well, why wouldn't they? All families want the best for their children, and with your cousins having become royal it must seem within the bounds of reality. And you're beautiful, with strong morals like Charlie, Lia and Toby. And, as we've said, they've been a breath of fresh air to the country."

"Well, I don't like Mikhail," she almost snapped, the sense of being hunted filling her again. "He's selfish and arrogant, and no title makes that appealing to me."

"You weren't tempted by his wealth or power?" he asked, sounding totally unoffended by her anger—more curious, if anything.

She shrugged. "I've learned the past year that there are other, more valuable things. What's the point of wealth if you don't have love, family or self-respect?"

He kept his eyes on her face, and seemed to take a half-step closer before he halted. "I think you're a very wise as well as a lovely woman, Mari Mitsialos," he said quietly.

Blushing, she turned away. "What's so wise about knowing the one basic fact of life?"

A quizzical look touched those amazing eyes of his. “You don’t think much of yourself, do you?”

She was lost in the feeling his closeness and his smile engendered in her body, and the question confused her. “Why would I?” she asked. “I’m just an average woman. My only claim to fame is through a couple of suddenly royal cousins.”

He chuckled. “‘Suddenly royal’—you have an interesting turn of phrase, Mari.”

She felt a little shiver run through her as he said her name on its own for the first time. Intimate and beautiful and *dangerous*...

As if he’d seen her internal reaction, he took a step closer, his eyes lighting with a candle of open desire. “The Captain told me to ask you if you’d like to stop at Santorini, which is a really beautiful place, with loads of things to do, or move on to a less populated island. He said we could sail around, finding places to swim until we reach Patmos—” his eyes twinkled again “—which I suspect is his personal favourite, since he was born there.”

She gulped against the yearning threatening to send her into total stupidity. *He’s not a chauffeur; he’s not married...* “Ah, and here I was thinking he must be a Bible fan,” she croaked. “Isn’t that where some books of the Bible were written?”

Lysander’s brows lifted, as if she’d surprised him again. “I know St John was imprisoned there. There are some tours you can take, if you’re interested in Bible history.”

She chuckled. “And have my parents think I’m ready to return to the fold?”

“Drone...drone...” he chanted, deadpan. When she stopped laughing, he said, “So, what is your choice for the day? The yacht is at your disposal.”

She looked at him with a hopeful, wistful feeling. “I know it’s touristy and all that, but I’d really like to see Santorini. They say it could be the real Atlantis...”

He smiled down at her. “Then Santorini it is. Would you like some company?”

Wistfulness grew in her. “Yes, please—if you don’t mind. I might get lost, or not know how to bargain for things.” And just because she wanted him beside her—and the least of his attraction was his title. She’d been just as fascinated when she’d thought him a chauffeur. Even now she knew who he was she couldn’t go back, couldn’t think of him as a duke, couldn’t distance herself. She couldn’t stay away...

One day. How had she become so enthralled by him in a single day?

As if he understood her inner dilemma, Lysander sobered. “I think you could

probably bargain your way into whatever you want by just smiling.”

Mari caught her breath. As if they were in a go-cart on a steep hill, she saw the inevitable crash before them—but they were going to do it anyway, going to take the ride and endure the fall.

She was already on that go-cart, already falling. And she couldn’t make herself care.

“I’ll tell the Captain to head for the dock, then,” Lysander said abruptly, and walked off, his clean stride seeming somehow hunted.

That evening

“Oh, my goodness, how wonderful was that?” Mari walked along the pier to the yacht beside a loaded-down Lysander, who was carrying her bags for her. “I can’t decide which was best—the markets, the tomato balls and couscous, or the volcano.” She gave a delicious shiver. “To think half the island just disappeared in an hour...a minute...”

Lysander smiled down at her, those dancing eyes shining in the light of the setting sun. He looked five years younger than this morning—his load lightened, just a man having fun. “I would have thought you liked the swimming best.”

She shook out her still-damp hair, falling in a corkscrew mess around her shoulders. “Well, wasn’t it wonderful? I know Australia’s famous for its beaches, but the water’s never like that—so gloriously warm, but not hot—except in the North, and then you have to watch for crocodiles. I felt like I was floating around in a warm salt bath.”

“Yes.” His tone—so amused without laughing at her—sent another delicious shiver through her. “The local men seemed to enjoy watching you...um...floating, as well.”

She blushed and shrugged. She couldn’t refute it, since at least a dozen had tried to charm her, both in the water and then offering their help in walking up the rocky sand. “I wasn’t trying to—oh! You don’t think they knew who my cousins are, do you?”

His face softened. “No, Mari, I think they saw a pretty woman enjoying life, and they wanted to enjoy it with you. I know I did.”

She couldn’t look at him as she said huskily, “Then why didn’t you swim with me?”

He didn’t speak, because they both knew the answer; and suddenly she felt a lump in her throat. “Stupid question. I need a shower to wash out all the salt before dinner. Thanks for carrying my bags.” Without meeting his eyes, she held

out her hands; he put her bags into them. “See you at dinner.”

“Mari?”

About to run, she turned her head, but didn’t look at him. “Yes?” Curse the huskiness in her voice! Did everything in her have to scream *I’ve got a crush on you?*

His voice sounded so gentle. “It wouldn’t have been wise for me to swim with you.”

She gulped. “I know. It’s all right. I wasn’t expecting—” Oh, what a fool she was making of herself!

“Will we go swimming tomorrow? It’s supposed to be a beautiful day, and the Captain knows some coves that are private on the way to Patmos, at Naxos or Icaria.”

The pity buried inside the offer made her burn inside with shame. He knew how she felt about him—falling faster than a bungee-jumper off a bridge—and he *pitied* her. “Someone might see us and put the wrong connotations on it. You can’t risk your career for me. We should stick to tourist things. It’s less—personal.”

“What if I want to get personal with you, Mari?” he asked, as husky as she. “What if I no longer care about the consequences?”

Her cheeks aflame, she whispered, “One of us has to care.” *For your sake.* And she found that was her real reason; he was a duke, and there wouldn’t be any consequences in their having a relationship for her.

But he could lose his career.

She all but fled inside to her cabin before he could look at her, touch her—or say a single word to change her mind.

Did she dare do it?

Blue dress: safety—little black dress: joy—green dress: protection—lavender silk...*bliss...*

“What are you carrying on about? For all you know, he doesn’t feel anything but politeness and diplomatic duty for you,” she muttered. “He hasn’t shown one single sign of interest. Wear something sensible and don’t make a total idiot of yourself—again!”

The sun had slowly dropped in the sky and, clad only in her underwear, fresh from her shower, she was choosing dresses at random and tossing them aside. She owned all of three sexy dresses, kept carefully from her parents’ view, and about ten safe, pretty, schoolmarm dresses that screamed, *Take me home to meet Mother.*

The trouble was she wanted to be sexy *and* be taken home to meet Mother—but the truth stared her in the face every day, with every word from his beautiful, cultured mouth: Lysander could never take her home. The way she saw it, she had two choices. She could follow her heart and her body's pleadings, wear one of her three hidden dresses and, if she could seduce him, become Lysander's lover for as long as she could hold him. Or she could play it safe, do the right thing for everyone else, and lose—

Lose what? That was the question, really. She'd known within a couple of days that Lysander was everything she'd ever dreamed of, but in her dreams she'd seen a man who loved her for life, not for a few days or weeks. Prince or duke, it made no difference for a girl like her. Lysander was as unattainable as Mikhail. She only wished he was as easy to reject and forget.

But still that lovely, silky, low-cut and high-slit lavender dress was in her hands...and then over her head...

Then she'd piled her hair up, letting it fall in tendrils over her neck and shoulders...soft make-up was on her face, and she'd sprayed that gorgeous perfume that made her think of black-hearted roses. And those naughty silver heels her mother had said made her look like a bad girl that she'd never been able to bring herself to return or wear...

Heart pounding and stomach churning, she left the room nine times and came back nine times, pacing the room and talking herself alternately into and out of it all. Brave chance or stupid risk? If only she knew. All she *did* know was that if she didn't try, didn't touch him, she'd regret it for life.

With that thought, finally she screwed her eyes shut and opened the door a tenth time, walked through it and closed it behind her.

Sander choked on his wine the moment she walked into the dining suite. Was it the Fates conspiring against him? He'd talked himself into and out of a tuxedo, into and out of soft, romantic music and candlelight...the staff didn't know if they were coming or going. Finally "out" had won, common sense had prevailed, and he'd begun to tell himself it was the right and noble thing—for Hellenia, for Persolis and for Mari. Definitely the right thing for everyone concerned to not even think of seducing her.

But then she'd come in wearing *that* dress.

Soft, swishing silk with thigh-high slits and cut low, revealing creamy cleavage. The honey-satin skin of her throat and neck was revealed by the curls piled high and tumbling down; a scent like sweet sin enveloped him in moments.

And that smile, so naughty and yet as adorably unsure as the look in her

eyes, was his downfall. Duke he was, diplomat he might be, but beneath it all he was just a man...

He only knew he was on his feet, walking to her when he lifted one of those soft, sweet-scented hands to his mouth and felt her quiver. Masculine heat and triumph flared through every pore and cell when he saw the look in her eyes. He pulled her to him, a question in his eyes and heart, and she answered with that dazzling, vivid smile. And that scent, reminiscent of full-blown roses on hot summer nights, filled his head as her core body temperature grew with her arousal.

She wanted him so badly she wasn't even trying to deny it.

She'd come here tonight hoping or expecting—he didn't know or care. The pounding of his blood made hope expectation, and expectation imperative. He tried to speak, but couldn't find words. There was only here and now: a lifetime waiting for a single moment.

"I don't think we're going to talk about droning in church, are we?" she whispered as he lowered his mouth to her, her eyes shimmering.

He choked on laughter, thinking of all the most poetic words to give her, but his mind failed him and he said simply, "No, we're not." And still smiling, he drew her right against him and kissed her.

He'd never known he could smile as he kissed a woman, but Mari did that to him. For years he'd wandered the world, equating success with happiness, learning how to do everything right and please everyone. Then this smiling bundle of feminine joy had come into his life—everything he shouldn't want and couldn't have. In a day she'd shown him how empty his smiles had been, how shallow his heart had been until she'd filled him with her sunshine and her passionate commitments, her high principles and her giving nature, so crystal-clear and so wonderfully impulsive. Everything he shouldn't want and couldn't have was standing in his arms, in one dazzling package of so-called ordinary woman.

Dimly he heard music as they kissed—the steward must have seen them, and that should have worried him, but didn't. Slowly he moved to the music, she followed, and still they kissed as he moved her out from the glass-enclosed room to the deck beneath summer stars.

Mari made a soft noise and wound a hand into his hair, tender and intimate, and something inside him exploded. Other women had touched him there, but somehow none of them had affected him the way Mari did. She touched him and he felt so *happy* inside... More, he had to have more—and he lifted her up against him and made her part of him, body and heart.

Impossible to ignore, unable to deny, he was *gone*—for the first time since

he'd had a crush on a princess, fifteen years ago. What was it about Mari? She was blunt, outspoken and no prettier than twenty women he knew—but her joy in living, her sparkling sense of adventure, drew him time after time. And her caring, her strong moral sense of right and wrong, her fear of hurting others, her vivid passion for—

Him. He'd only seen a shy kind of embarrassment with the men who had flocked around her this afternoon, but for him she smiled, blushed, and the yearning in her eyes came alive...just as he came alive with her, and had done from the first moment he'd seen her.

This was why he'd avoided her from the start. Losing his position with Mikhail had been a convenient excuse. When he was close to her he forgot everything but his need to be with her. Mari held the power to make him toss aside consequences and not care a bit. She was like liquid sunshine, and he wanted more and more...

He wanted too much, too fast. Mari had said clearly that she was going home in a few days. She loved it here, but she belonged in Australia. If she complicated his life, he could take the consequences—but he'd ruin her chances of ever going back to safe anonymity. Would she hate him for that?

“Lysander, Lysander,” she mumbled between kisses. Her hands were tangled in his hair. So much passion, such vivid, innocent need for him—

And if she couldn't stop, he was completely addicted to the shots of bubbling happiness she injected with a smile, with a touch, with the way she said his name. And her kisses—

Consequences go hang. This was here and now. She was in his arms, and she was staying there as long as he could keep her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Three days later

“AT THE risk of sounding like a complete tourist—what a fantastic place,” Mari sighed as they moved back onto the yacht. “The tour was really excellent.”

“It certainly was informative,” Sander agreed, with a fatalistic feeling inside. If his mother heard of his Bible tour in Patmos, he’d never hear the end of it.

So why was he smiling?

The answer was right in front of him, her curvy backside swaying as she ran up the gangplank. Mari made him smile just by being near him. Her enthusiasm for life was infectious, and it made him feel glad to be here—just glad to be alive.

“Couldn’t you just *imagine* St John sitting in the cave, seeing all those visions?” she asked, flushed and starry-eyed as she flopped down on a deck lounger. “The guide described it so you *knew* how he must have felt. Coming here makes it all real, doesn’t it?”

Actually, Sander would have been totally bored but for the constant entertainment of Mari’s wide-eyed wonder as they toured the island. And her italics, instead of annoying him, kept him amused. Mari’s dramatics were as natural to her as breathing, and endearing because they weren’t designed to draw attention to her. She just said what was on her mind, and she was as passionate about others’ interests as her own.

On that note, he said, “The donkeys were real, at any rate, and very grateful to you.”

Mari’s chin lifted. “It’s a disgrace the way that master treated them. None of the other masters were cruel—their donkeys were well cared for. Somebody should do something about him, like those animal liberation groups.”

“You did something,” he replied, holding in a smile, thinking of her cold refusal to ride on a too-thin donkey with scars on its back. She’d walked all the way up to the caves...and one pleading look from those pretty eyes had had him climbing off his donkey as well. A few sad glances at the state of the donkeys other tourists rode on had had some of their riders joining in the silent protest.

"Maybe you'll do better business if you learn to take care of your donkeys," she had told the indignant master. "Take a lesson from the other masters."

"A private protest isn't enough," she said now. "Are we online on the yacht? I'd like to find a website—"

"You can't save the world, Mari," he said gently.

"Don't say that!" Her eyes flashed. "It's an excuse to do nothing! If everyone cared enough to right one wrong, just one, how much would the world improve?"

She was right. Most of the women he'd been with cared only for their next beauty treatment, or being the first to wear a new dress or hairdo or sunglasses and set a fashion. "So you're righting the wrongs of donkeys?" he teased, wanting to see her passion continue—with him. Their kisses were getting more intense by the hour, and he was more and more enchanted by her. They both knew it couldn't last; he'd eventually find his Duchess and have heirs, and she'd find a man to walk her down the aisle—

He had to blank out the thought, for the face he saw was his own—and the face of his Duchess was Mari's.

"At least I care for something more than my own wants and fears," she flashed. "Do you? Do you care enough for your people to give up what you love and do your best for them?"

With a few pithy words she'd cut through the layers of his self-delusion to the ugly core truth. Though his diplomatic work and ties would help Persolis, that wasn't why he'd stayed on in the Corps. He hadn't planned to be Duke, had never wanted it. He liked his life as it was. He didn't want to change it, didn't want to right anyone's wrongs on a deeper level than he did now. And when the promised time came to take over and let his mother retire, would he continue making excuses?

Not now. Not now he saw himself for the man he was—and didn't like it. He *did* care for his land, his people—and it was time to stop running away.

"I'm sorry, that was out of line," she mumbled, as he seemed still lost in his thoughts. "It's none of my business what you do, Lysander. It's between you and your mother."

"And my people." He fixed his gaze on her, loving the honest remorse in her pretty face. Loving her *caring*. Just—*loving*. Wanting her to feel proud of him, he gave her similar honesty. "I'm going back, Mari. Even if I don't feel qualified, I'm going back."

Her smile, so tentative, grew until a light like sunrise filled her eyes. "Start small and work your way up, Dad always says. He began by picking up rubbish on the beaches. Now, twenty years later, he earns a good living in recycling with

his ‘clean green’ business. He even consults with members of the Australian Government on safe rubbish storage practices.”

“Impressive,” he murmured, wanting to kiss her so badly it was pain. But—hadn’t he met a green representative on unsafe rubbish practices last time he was in Persolis? He remembered signing something to make changes to an edict of his father’s, so that residents near the dump were exposed to less hazardous waste...

Suddenly intrigued, he asked, “What does he do with rubbish that’s so unique the government consults him on it?”

“He’s invented a kind of environmental blanket for naturally-degradable rubbish, and is working on a radiation-reducing container for toxic waste.” Grinning, Mari rose from the deck lounger. “Dad’s passion for a cleaner environment is too serious a conversation on a stomach only filled with ice cream. See you at dinner.”

She ran lightly along the deck, her curly ponytail floating behind her. She had a little tripping step; he always thought she’d fall flat on her face at any moment. Sander had been appreciating her unusual way of moving for days. He’d finally worked it out, after watching her constantly: she had a slight tendency toward pigeon toes she was forcing outward, and it made her awkward. Graceful she was not.

And yet though this couldn’t possibly last beyond the few days they were on the yacht, he couldn’t stop smiling. And wishing. And wanting.

The worst of it was the more he had of her, the more he wanted—a lifetime of *more*—and duty was flapping out through the window on the wings of an albatross, slow and relentless.

Slow? He’d known her all of five days, and for the past four days all he’d been able to think of was touching her again, and the joy of having that gorgeous smile beaming up at him as she laid her sweet little hands on him. When they’d swum off Naxos he’d been in pain, trying to keep his hands and body to himself; but she hadn’t had such scruples. She’d started a splashing contest as an excuse to get closer, and wrapped silky-wet arms around his neck.

“I know,” she’d breathed, as an attack of unwanted conscience had taken him over and he’d tried to hold off. “This is all we can have, Lysander. It’s just a holiday romance—so let’s enjoy our holiday.”

The tender acceptance in her words had made him hate himself, but he hadn’t held back. Sweet, salty kisses in the warm ocean with a woman he liked, respected as well as desired—a memory to keep when he had to do his duty and marry the right woman.

He’d made dozens of memories since then: dancing beneath the stars at

night; eating from her fork at lunch at Naxos; her soft moans when they touched; the feel of her against him when they kissed, her body always straining to be closer.

They had to get back to Hellenia, and fast. He couldn't hold out much longer—and not just against making love to her. Every day, every hour, he was falling in deeper. He was barely sleeping, filled with the need to get off the bed, walk about forty feet, pull her into his arms and tell her, *Let's do what your great-uncle did—run away and forget the consequences. It won't start a war this time...*

He groaned to himself. How could she say yes, given her family history and her love for her cousins? But it didn't stop the stupid hope that she'd put him first... That she'd marry him and give him a lifetime of her caring, her scruples and her joy in living, in touching him. He couldn't lie to himself: he loved Mari, but he couldn't make love to her. He couldn't bring himself to hurt her, knowing he had to walk away. All he could hope for was more wonderful kisses...and that he'd remember her and their time together with a smile when he did his duty.

"Your Grace, Her Majesty the Queen is on the phone for you," the steward informed him respectfully.

"Perfect timing," he murmured beneath his breath. Racked with guilt, filled with hidden resentment against the future and the duty he had to embrace, Sander walked to the bridge to speak to Jazmine.

"Tonight's the night," Mari said softly to herself as she pulled the little black dress from its hanger.

They were out of time; they docked back at Orakidis Harbour tomorrow.

Lysander's scruples made him even more wonderful to her—she knew he was holding back on making love for her sake—but if this time was all they could have...if this night was their last...she wanted to have a night to remember.

Tonight, all she hadn't been able to bear with Mikhail would become all she could dream of. Tonight she'd give everything to Lysander. One night with the man she was head over heels in love with would be worth the price she paid later.

How she'd fallen in love so fast, after a lifetime of never loving any other man she'd met, she had no idea. Perhaps it was holiday love—maybe it could never last for them—but right now she didn't care. She only asked for tonight.

Deliberately she wore no shoes, no jewellery, and left her hair down, mussed

with mousse, as if she'd just risen from bed. She wore no make-up but shimmering lipgloss. The dress, with its spaghetti straps and flaring short skirt, gave the message she needed.

This time there was no agonised indecision. She walked straight out of her room and up the stairs to the dining hall—and caught her breath. Lysander waited for her in a magnificent tuxedo, with a deep red rose in his hand, and that smile. “Mari *mou*,” he said softly—*My Mari*.

Wanting nothing more than to run into his arms, she couldn't ruin the moment. She walked slowly to him, her whole body alight with joy and need. “Lysander...” she breathed.

“We're not going to talk about safe garbage practices tonight,” he murmured as he put the rose in her hand.

Even as she lifted the rose to her face, she choked on laughter. “No, we're not.” And she slid her arms around his neck. “Make love to me.”

His eyes took fire, but still they searched hers. “Are you sure?”

“I know we can only have tonight.” She smiled bravely up at him, a mass of yearning and sad acceptance twining in her heart. “Tomorrow we pretend it didn't happen, for everyone's sake—you'll keep your position, and I'll go home. But tonight is ours.”

“No. Either way, I'm going home too. You were right—it's time for me to take my place in Persolis.” A tender hand caressed her cheek; his eyes were filled with desire, with *caring*, and she felt her heart splinter. “I don't want just one night with you, Mari. I want you to know that if it were up to me we'd have so much more.”

She closed her eyes in joy and agony. One of them had to keep their head. *For Lysander's sake, and for his people.* “Change will come to Hellenia slowly. There's no convenient duchy for me, to make me acceptable. I can't be like Great-Uncle Kyri and Great-Aunt Giulia, and toss aside the consequences to others. So let's have tonight.”

Lysander kissed her once, twice, and melting honey filled her body, sweet yearning and hot need. “You're so lovely, so strong and caring—you'd fight for what's right. You'd make a magnificent duchess...” he whispered in her ear, and she felt the *if only* hovering in the air between them.

Moved, lost, she had to struggle against saying something stupid. “Take me to bed.”

He lifted her in his arms. “I feel so happy when I'm touching you.”

That was it—she'd waited for so long for this kind of happiness, for the dream to come. But this could only be a holiday romance. They were worlds apart; only the here and now existed for them. “Me too.”

“I tried to stop this,” he mumbled hoarsely between kisses. “But how do I resist a woman who’s perfect for me in every way, or tell my heart to stop feeling like this? In a world where I rarely know what to believe, I believe in you, Mari.”

“Lysander,” she whispered against his mouth, angling her face so it fitted his perfectly. She felt so *wonderful* in his arms...He murmured endearments in his native tongue, and her heart became his—but she gave it in silence, for his sake.

“This is inevitable,” he whispered. “We’re inevitable. We’re right. Tell me you feel it, Mari. I know you do.”

Oh, she did, but at this moment, when dream could become reality, the strong streak of practicality in her overtook her fantasies and stepped gently on them. “I want to make love,” she said in reply, because there was nothing else to say.

Instead of taking her to bed, he put her back on her feet and cupped her face in his hands. “You don’t believe in us?”

Hating to hurt him, she hesitated a moment too long, and his hands dropped from her face. She felt the words hovering on his tongue—then he stepped back; the emotion in his eyes dimmed, and he said, smooth and oh, so cool, “Dinner will be getting cold.”

Mari’s smile faltered; the stars dimmed in her eyes and she nodded. “I understand, Your Grace.” Her voice was thick. “I’m not very hungry. Good night.”

And with her acceptance, when his words had been designed to make her fight for him, Sander panicked. “No, Mari.” He strode to her—she was already walking out through the door—and snatched her close and kissed her, but she didn’t respond. “Stay,” he commanded roughly. “I’ll *make* you believe in us.”

She shook her head and stepped back out of his arms. “I should never have started this. Like Prince Mikhail, you can’t offer me anything better, and I can’t humiliate my family.”

There lay their conflict in a nutshell. She’d said everything he wanted to ignore when he’d spoken of fate. “This *isn’t* like Mikhail. I *respect* you. I want more than a few weeks in bed.” More like the next five decades—but he wouldn’t say that until he was sure his feelings for her would last. He needed to feel enough to base a lifetime on—for all the wrong reasons as well as the right ones.

“You can’t have it.” Her voice wobbled with sadness, but she spoke with the conviction of knowing she was right. “Charlie has changed the law for future kings and queens. Great-Uncle Kyri had a Grand Duchy to hand Toby in order for him to get his miracle. But even a duke isn’t powerful enough to change the

way things are in Persolis. Uncle Kyri started a civil war after disappearing with a commoner—and he had a title and power. I have nothing.” She stepped back. “I think we should remain separate until we reach Orakidis Harbour tomorrow.”

She was probably right, but angry at her fatalism, he snapped, “Why did you come here dressed like that if you won’t take the next step and accept the consequences?”

She shook her head. “I thought I was courageous. I thought I could be your lover for tonight and be happy with the memories. But I’m afraid of hurting Charlie and Jazmine, Lia and Toby—not to mention my parents. I don’t care if I’m a hypocrite. I’m traditional. I want an old-fashioned wedding with both families there and being happy for us.”

Her voice trembled, her eyes shimmered, and he wanted to see her cry even less than she wanted to be weak in front of him. “Go,” he said wearily. He didn’t know what the future held, but he was hurt that Mari wasn’t willing to risk everything for him. “I’ll order a tray to your room, and the yacht to return to dock by morning. We’re not far from Hellenia.”

She turned away and left the room in a soft swish of black silk. She looked like a dream of lost beauty, a sweet ghost floating through the doors, leaving his life.

And it was only as she walked away that he knew he couldn’t bear to think of a day, an hour without her. He’d do whatever it took to hold her—even face the wrath of princes and kings.

All he had to do was convince her.

CHAPTER SIX

THERE was a right royal welcoming committee waiting for them when they entered Orakidis Harbour the next morning.

Mari's heart sank when she saw the *big* royal yacht—at least twice the size of the magnificent one she now loved so much—sailing up beside them, with no less than three royal personages on deck: Charlie, Jazmine and Mikhail. All three of them were dressed casually, but looked grim. Charlie and Jazmine smiled at them as the yacht drew alongside, but Mikhail's handsome face was set in impenetrable lines. Though the sun was shining, and the sky was clear, Mari saw storm clouds ahead. She sidled up to Lysander; her hand crept into his. “Prince Mikhail wouldn’t be here unless...”

He nodded, his face smoothing out to diplomatic neutrality. “I’ll deal with this.” He squeezed her hand briefly before he stepped away. “We’ve done nothing, feel nothing we need to be ashamed of, Mari. Hold onto that when Mikhail starts.”

Knowing what she now knew, after ten minutes’ research that first night, she knew what a sacrifice he was offering for her sake. “All right—thank you.”

Then three more people emerged from the enormous double doors leading inside the royal yacht...and she groaned inside. “My parents, and my brother... Dad’s likely to insist on a wedding. I’m sorry—so sorry...”

Lysander sent her an oblique smile. “I don’t think marrying you would be my worst nightmare, Mari. I’d survive the ordeal of a shotgun wedding...even if your brother’s pretty big and intense-looking. He didn’t bring a shotgun with him from Australia, did he?”

Unbelievably, Mari heard laughter escape her lips. Envisaging a lifetime of diplomatic disasters leavened by laughter wasn’t so hard at all right then—if Lysander was the one sharing with her the drama and the intimate jokes for two. “Of course he didn’t—and if he has one now he’s probably still aiming it at Mikhail.”

“That’s a relief. Leave it to me,” he murmured with an infinitesimal wink.

She smiled and nodded, almost without movement. They moved towards the gangplank now connecting the two royal yachts.

Sander had felt the axe hovering over his head ever since Mari had discovered he wasn't a chauffeur, but like an idiot, he'd chosen to ignore it—to live the half-lie another day, another minute. Unable to stand seeing the admiration, the joy in his company fade from those lovely eyes, he hadn't been able to make himself do it.

And he was about to pay for it. Mikhail would make certain of that. So far he'd kept silent as those in precedence spoke—Charlie hugging her and Jazmine asking about her time away—but, his face taut and his eyes hard, Sander knew Mikhail was just biding his time.

"Can you do something about those poor donkeys?" Mari was asking Charlie, her gaze pleading. If she'd looked at him like that Sander would have agreed to standing on his head. He was totally besotted—and counting the seconds until he lost her. He'd planned on winning. If Mikhail hadn't come...

Charlie looked torn. "It's not my country, Mari—but I can try to work it into a speech somewhere," he added hastily, as his cousin's eyes shimmered.

Mari threw her arms around the King of Hellenia. "You're the best cousin in the world—and I would have said it even if you weren't a king," she added with impish generosity.

Charlie chuckled and lightly buffed her chin. "I know, Mariela. You've been saying it since I chased the dog off that bedraggled old cat you loved when you were six."

"And I've always meant it." She buried her face in Charlie's neck.

Sander watched, fascinated. The dynamics of an ordinary family wasn't something that had come his way. Seeing the common man inside the King of Hellenia made him respect Charlie more. He didn't pretend to be something he wasn't, and the innate strength of his background and family ties made him a monarch people could relate to and trust.

Sander saw the same half-hungry fascination in Mikhail's eyes, and the amused contempt he used to cover his true emotion. He realised Mikhail did care for Mari, but had no idea how to be honest with her, or how to play any part but the prince. His inner helplessness at failing to win her had made him just as angry at himself as at Mari, Charlie and Jazmine—

Mari smiled at him from her cousin's shoulder, sharing her joy with Sander over the hopeful salvation of those poor donkeys.

Drumroll, please...the guillotine blade was in place...

"So, are you going to marry my daughter after compromising her in this public fashion?" Mari's father demanded of Sander in a mild yet inflexible tone. "The press knows where you've both been—and alone."

“Stop it, Dad,” Mari murmured, her tone as imperative as it was anguished. “Nothing happened.”

“You were alone with a single man for days, touring the islands—and at night,” her father replied, in a parental *this ends the argument* tone. “I will protect your reputation, Mariela—and the reputation of our family,” he added, flicking a glance at Charlie.

In answer, Mari looked to where Mikhail stood, furious and silent. The irony in her expression couldn’t be clearer.

“They were hardly alone, Uncle Taki,” Charlie protested, just as mildly, his voice filled with respect for his uncle. “Jazmine and I made certain Mari was protected at all times.”

“But not from the spotlight of the media,” Mari’s father retorted. “Charlie, you know by now that not even a king can stop rumour and speculation. There was enough about Prince Mikhail’s *honourable* intentions.”

The slightest hint of irony in the stressed word made Sander want to smile. So that was where Mari got her flair for drama from—and it seemed Mikhail had shown his true intentions during the past few days.

“Nobody knows what His Grace’s intentions are towards our girl.”

With a sense of fatalism, Sander recognised Mari’s father’s ambition for his daughter to become a duchess—but, over that, a hard thrill was running through him that had nothing to do with his duty. Thanks to her father, he now had a chance. He might not win her fairly, but he’d win her. Mari would be his—she’d be his wife, his love. His doubts fled. The simple truth was he’d never be happy without her.

“You’re right to ask, sir,” he said, with the same quiet respect with which Charlie had spoken. “I care deeply for Mari, as she knows. It would be an honour and a privilege if you would allow me to ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage.”

Taki Mitsialos beamed at him, and moved forward to shake his hand. “Good boy, good boy,” he said heartily, pumping Sander’s hand. “Charlie told me you were well brought up, but you never know with the upper classes if they are sincere or playing games, thinking we commoners are expendable.” A flicked glance at Mikhail showed Sander that they’d definitely discovered the Prince’s true intentions some time in the past few days. “Our girl will be a duchess!”

“No, Dad, I won’t.”

The inflexible tone, exactly like her father’s, made everyone turn to Mari. She stood small and alone, a step away from her royal cousin, her face pale and her hands clenched. “Thank you for asking, Your Grace, but the answer is no. You’ve done nothing to necessitate marriage. I won’t have anyone believing you

did. I won't trap a good man into marriage."

Mikhail's face changed subtly at her calm declaration. From barely concealed fury to hunter. Sander saw the plans crossing Mikhail's mind.

In that moment Sander knew his diplomatic career was at an end. But he'd toss aside all consequences if it meant Mari would be safe from Mikhail's predatory clutches.

"It's no trap," he said, over the protesting voices of her family. "I want to marry you, Mari. You know that. I told you last night how I feel." And he smiled at her—the unfair smile that made her desire him.

Mari stared at him, her mouth open, and moistened her lower lip with her tongue. He saw the pulse beating hard in her throat. "No, you don't. Please stop lying for my sake, Your Grace. There's no need to protect me. I'm flying home—today, if that's all right?" She turned to Charlie and Jazmine, her gaze pleading. "I want to go home and forget any of this happened." Her clear-eyed gaze, first at Mikhail and then at Lysander, told him how serious she was.

But he wasn't going down without a fight.

Amid the loud protests of her parents and her brother, and the cautious silence of the others, Sander knew this would be the fight of his life. "Mari, if we could talk privately, I think I could convince you of just how much I want you to be my wife," he said. And his smile grew.

Her eyes widened a little; a delectable flush filled her throat and her breathing quickened. He felt that hard thrill chasing along his nerve-endings—she wanted him so much she couldn't hide it, even in front of Mikhail—but then she backed away, a hand lifted in denial.

"Really, there's no need for it, Y-Your Grace. You have your life, I have mine, and the two aren't compatible. You can't become a commoner, and I don't want to be a duchess. We've had a lovely few days—and I hope we can remain friends—but we hardly know each other. We only met six days ago. The very thought of marriage is ridiculous."

Her father and mother burst into indignant speech; Stavros made a helpless gesture at Charlie. The young King's face reflected a weary fatalism: his family was ignorant of the intense pressure of international politics. The threat of an Orakis coup if the new Marandis dynasty showed too much nepotism was real. He couldn't press for more law changes for their sakes, or even for Mari—his favourite cousin.

Jazmine, her face calm, moved to hold Mari's hand. "I propose we stop here. Obviously we've come here with expectations that aren't reflecting the truth, and we're only distressing Mari. Aunt Maria, why don't we take Mari somewhere quiet to talk?"

“Thank you, Your Majesty, but this isn’t a matter for you or the King,” Sander said, with a mixture of respect and inflexibility. “This is between Mari and me, without interference.”

A look of surprise crossed Jazmine’s face. “You’re right, Sander. I beg your pardon—Mari as well.” With a soft kiss to Mari’s cheek, she moved aside.

Sander kept his gaze wholly on Mari. “This doesn’t belong to anyone but us, Mari—not your parents, not kings or princes—just us.”

Mari blinked, her pretty face covered in confusion that he was still even here, let alone still trying to win her.

He took her hand in his. “I understand what you’re saying, and why—but you can’t deny there’s something between us, no matter how short a time we’ve known each other.” He saw the blush creep up her cheeks, and with a smile he held out a hand to her. “Will you please give me an hour, Mari?”

He saw it, saw her eyes soften and her sweet mouth give that tiny half-pout that meant she was thinking...she was tempted...she was giving in...

“Loath as I am to interrupt this magical moment between lovers, I have appointments to keep—and I have a few words to say. You’re fired, Sander. I don’t keep disloyal employees—and don’t bother asking for a reference. Your time in Chalnikan—and with the Diplomatic Corps, if I have anything to say about it—is done.”

Sander held the groan inside. Mikhail was going down swinging. He still wanted Mari—and, more, he didn’t want Sander to win. Now Mari knew it all. He moved to take her hand, to force an hour in private, to explain—

But Mari, her face amused, had turned to Mikhail. “If that was meant as a revelation, Your Highness, you’re a few days too late. I’ve known for days that Lysander worked for you—or, more accurately, for your father the King. And not only does it not bother me, your firing him for following the orders of your father, as well as his king and queen, doesn’t make your proposition to me more attractive. Once and for all, Your Highness, I will *never* want you.”

Mari’s family gasped at her bluntness; Jazmine and Charlie kept their faces impassive, as did Sander—though it was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do when he was dying to swing her into his arms and kiss her senseless—but all gazes swung to the young, spoiled Prince who’d never had to take no for an answer from a woman, and never in public.

Mikhail’s cheeks whitened, but after a moment he sneered. “I withdrew that particular offer days ago, Miss Mitsialos. I care nothing for what you do, or who you choose to sleep with. I came only to fire a disloyal employee.”

“Liar,” she said calmly, smiling at him as his cheeks changed from pale to mottled dark red with fury at a term no one had ever dared throw at him before.

“Your face gives away everything you think and feel. You know, looking at yourself honestly—and accepting defeat now and then—will make you a better king when your time comes, Mikhail. You should take lessons from my cousin. He puts others before himself. That’s what a good king does.”

Without a word, Mikhail turned and strode down the gangplank to the other yacht.

“Well, that’s a relief. Back to family,” Charlie said—but his face changed in moments when his wife gave a tiny shake of her head. “Um...right. Uncle Taki, Aunt Maria, Stavros—I think we should leave Mari and Lysander alone to talk.”

The family vanished before either of them could speak.

“Traitors,” he heard Mari mutter, and he held in a chuckle. The thought of a lifetime laughing with her was so very appealing.

“So how did you know about my position in Chalnikan?” he asked quietly as he led her out of the hot sunshine into a solar, seating her on a chaise.

She shrugged as she made herself comfortable. “You said you were a diplomat, but not where. So I did a Google search on you. Sit down, Lysander. I don’t like being at a disadvantage.”

He mock-groaned, but sat beside her. “You did a *Google* search on me? I feel violated. I wish I’d never told you we had net access here.”

The smile in her voice made him smile in return. “Even commoners have their ways.”

He tilted his head and checked her out. “I hadn’t realised how much of a snob you are until today.” Ignoring the indignant flash of her eyes, he went on, “My life isn’t a fairy tale, Mari. Much of the time it’s like walking a tightrope of expectation. I’d have thought Charlie’s new life would have shown you the reality of the life of the upper classes. Every member of the nobility still has to eat, sleep and use the bathroom. They still need to find love, get married and have children. And that’s what I want with you.”

“It’s only been six days,” she retorted with clear asperity, and he knew he’d upset her by calling her on her delusions. “We both know this isn’t real.”

Sander wanted to smile again. She sounded hunted, which meant she was tempted. He struggled against calling her a liar. He was a diplomat—he knew when to call a spade a spade and when to be tactful. A woman on the run did *not* want to hear she was being a coward. “I know it seems insane. It’s too soon. I can’t possibly love you—but the thing is, in these few days you’ve shown me a new way to look at the world,” he said softly, taking her hand in his, feeling happiness pierce him with almost knife-edged beauty. “You’ve made me see things differently, Mari. You’ve made me think, kept me laughing—and when you touched me, kissed me, you bowled me out. Completely. I spent last night

imagining a lifetime of laughing with you, of learning from you—" he grinned "—and, of course, of kisses that make me melt. And I saw at least four little boys and girls who'd teach me not to take life too seriously. I saw my children with milk-chocolate eyes and gorgeous curls."

"No, eyes like the sun sparkling on the Aegean and a smile that makes my insides flip," she replied absently, her gaze focussed on his mouth. Then she inhaled sharply. "I didn't mean to say that."

Sander was no fool. As a famous king once said, there was a time to speak and a time to be silent. She'd been dreaming of him, she loved his eyes and smile, saw her children with those attributes; it was enough. It was a weapon to fight with until she was so desperate for him she'd wave the white flag of surrender willingly and say the words he'd spent a lifetime running from. Words he was now desperate to hear from only one woman's mouth.

Oh, that sweet mouth...

It was time for the best kind of battle—a fight without words. He leaned into her and brushed his mouth over hers.

One, two, three butterfly kisses, waiting for her response—and then her hands were in his hair, she was falling back, bringing him with her as he took the kiss deeper, hotter, loving the rightness of lying on her, hearing her soft moans of joy, feeling her frantic hands touching him everywhere she could.

He kissed his way slowly down her throat and along her collarbone, hearing her murmur, "Lysander, Lysander," as if she couldn't get enough of him.

He'd never liked his full name before, but from the first time she'd said it he'd been hooked: a private whisper of her passion for him. When they were together, when they touched, it didn't matter that they'd only met days before, or that they were Duke and commoner. Right now they were just a man and a woman, so right for each other it seemed ridiculous to let a title, or even his people, get in the way.

Finally he understood why a king would abdicate for the sake of the woman he loved...

"Don't go, Mari *mou*," he whispered in her ear, feeling her shiver. "At least stay long enough to know if this is real, if we can make it."

She stilled beneath him. "I can't be a duchess."

He lifted his head from where he'd been exploring her ear with his lips. "Yes, you can," he said softly. "You *care*, Mari. All my people want is someone to care for them."

She shook her head, her mouth set stubbornly.

"I realise there are more things to think about than you and me alone. If you come to Persolis and decide you can't be Duchess, maybe you can be my love,

my wife, and let me do the work.” And then, no matter how she might promise to stay out of political life, within weeks she’d be questioning his every decision, giving him the human side of every problem. And when she did, he’d be the happiest duke in the world—because he needed her wisdom as much as he needed her smile, her laugh and her touch.

“I *can’t*,” she said again, a mulish look to her chin even as she wriggled beneath him—not trying to make him get off her, judging by the languid look in her eyes.

Oh, she wanted him—how she wanted him—but he saw the battle being lost through a lack of knowledge of his life. He changed tactics. “Just come to Persolis with me. See what you’re turning down before you go back to your exciting life.”

She pulled a face at his reference to the job she’d told him she hated on one of their island tours. “I’ll lose my job.”

He moved against her as he curved a hand around her cheek, and saw her forget what she’d been talking about. “I can see how tempting it would be. Receptionist or duchess—continue living with your parents...” her expression was indescribable at that “...or living with me, sharing my bed, my kisses...” He punctuated each word with a lingering kiss, making her moan and move beneath him.

“Stop it, Lysander,” she whispered, even as she turned her face to take in another kiss. “You—you’re trying to seduce me into it...”

“And totally without shame, too,” he whispered back, finger-drawing down the inside of her arm, feeling her body quiver in sweet, honest response.

Air was expelled from her lungs in a rush. “You don’t know me. It’s only been a few days.”

He was skilled in word analysis. He heard the fear and the longing, the wistful wishing and her terror that the love they both felt would go belly-up as fast as it had come to them. The dreamer fought the practical woman, sword to battleaxe, and not even Mari knew which was winning.

“We’ll never know if you leave,” he murmured, kissing her ear, loving the sensual squirm she gave. “Stay with me—a few weeks, a few months—until we know. It’s not merely about how we are together when we touch, as wonderful as that is. It’s about your laughter and your sunshine, your principles and your honesty, your caring and your refusal to back down. You have so much courage, Mari. Don’t lose it now.”

She buried her face in his neck. “Lysander...”

She was melting—but even while he felt the surge of masculine triumph, he knew this decision was too important for her to be seduced into it. “I can tell you

I've never felt like this with any woman, but how can you believe it? You need time to know it won't change—and I need time to convince you. Stay with me here in Hellenia, Mari—give us time to know this is real."

"How can you not be angry? You lost your job because of me," she whispered.

He closed his eyes at his stupidity. Of course she'd think he'd resent her for that. "Actually, I've been offered a better post—if I decide to take it. Even if I don't, all you and Mikhail have done is eased a decision that was too hard for me. I've been avoiding it since Konstantinos joined the monastery. I've been telling myself it was best to stay on a while longer, to foster good relationships in the European capitals to benefit Persolis—and it was the right decision. But you're right—it's time for me to take my place in Persolis and let my mother retire." When she didn't answer, he said, "Why aren't you angry? I didn't tell you who I worked for, or why I took you away to separate you from Mikhail."

She nodded, her eyes sincere. "There's no point in my being offended. Mikhail's insistence was causing an embarrassing situation for everyone. I'm grateful you helped me, and that you didn't judge me or think me a mercenary woman out for what I could get."

She was so innocent and wise, his lovely Mari—and he wanted to smile, as he always did when he was in her company. He held her closer. "Nobody could have looked at you, heard you that first day, and thought the worst of you, Mari."

Her eyes shimmered, and he saw yearning and caring there—then they closed over. "I need space, Lysander. I need time to think."

A good diplomat knew when to push and when to retire. "Of course," he murmured, and moved off her body—it felt as if he'd left something behind as he stood. Maybe his heart. "All I ask is that you give us a chance...and listen to your heart, Mari."

He saw the doubt in her face—the self-doubt. She needed to convince herself—which she'd never be able to do if she were a runner.

Such a shame for his sweet love that she was fighting someone with the best diplomatic contacts in the Corps.

Sander grinned, anticipating each and every battle...

CHAPTER SEVEN

A month later

“Is THIS a joke? You’ve had my passport for a month now, and the problem isn’t fixed?”

Mari glared at the plump, middle-aged woman behind the glass counter at the Australian Consulate, who smiled apologetically. “I am afraid not, madam. The irregularity with your passport is an unusual one, and it has to be sorted out at the London office. Until your passport returns here you can’t travel.”

In other words, *you can’t leave Hellenia until a certain diplomat removes the unusual irregularity he created especially to keep you here.* She knew the unspoken terms: *Come and see me. Come to Persolis.*

Right then Mari wanted to see Lysander, all right—to throttle him. This woman was like Sergeant Schultz from *Hogan’s Heroes*—she knew *nothing*. And those who could help her, the Ambassador and all his aides, were all far too busy to get her home.

Too busy to see the King’s cousin, were they? When they’d been fawning over her until now? Did Lysander have the entire diplomatic staff on his side, as well as her family?

Everyone wanted her to stay in Hellenia. Her parents weren’t going home, and neither was Stavros. Her dad, having toured Hellenia for three weeks as a resident expert in green solutions, had gone to Persolis five days ago at Lysander’s invitation, giving unorthodox solutions to the age-old problem of garbage storage.

“What? You think the entire country turned out their garbage in an effort to keep you here?” her father had asked indignantly, when she’d tried to blame Lysander for her dad’s sudden elevation in status to First Assistant to the Minister for the Environment.

And Stavros was finishing his medical studies at the University of Orakidis.

“How can you call it nepotism?” he’d protested, when she’d questioned his sudden scholarship for his final years. “They *need* more doctors here, Mariela. There’s been war here for decades. I can speak the language, I have family

connections, and I came in the top ten percent in all my exams at Sydney Uni. For the first time I can study full-time, instead of working my way through.”

When she’d kept trying to make him see what was really going on, Stavros had mocked her. “Oh? So Sander arranged my good marks over the past five years to keep you here? When did you become so self-important, little sister?”

“Go to him, Mariela,” was her mother’s unvarying advice. “Go to Persolis and judge for yourself whether or not you can make a difference.”

Her parents and Stavros had gone deaf without warning, refusing to interfere or even listen to her reasons for not marrying Lysander. Jazmine was full of stories about the Duke, making him appear a cross between a saint and the loneliest man in the world. And Charlie’s schedule this past week had been too full for him to help on the matter of her passport issues.

“Is the Duke of Persolis here?” she asked the woman, wondering if he was listening in somewhere, waiting for her to ask for him.

“Yes, madam, he is here currently—attending an important meeting. Would you like to see him?” The woman’s searching look was answer enough: Lysander wasn’t at any meeting. He was waiting for her to ask for him, even if all she wanted was to tear him limb from limb.

Steam almost pouring from her ears, she snapped, “Yes, please.”

Moments later she was ushered into a functional office. The door closed behind her—and Lysander stood up behind the desk he sat at and smiled at her. “I’ve missed you so much,” he said simply, his arms held out to her.

Oh, how unfair was it that he’d said that, making her melt when she was so furious? “Don’t distract me, Lysander. Play fair!”

Yet, confused, filled with turbulent hunger, she took a step closer...

“I can’t afford to.” He moved towards her, slow and cautious, with that fascinating smile. “You’d only run away if I did. You wouldn’t give us a chance.”

Her cheeks heated in unspoken acknowledgement of his words. “I can’t stay,” she cried, feeling wretched. “Don’t you see it will never work?”

“All I can see is you. I’m dying to touch you,” he said huskily. Those eyes... that smile...

And she was in his arms. “Lysander.”

The kiss was everything she’d been dreaming of during the long, lonely month without him. She forgot all the good reasons to leave. She forgot she was mad with him—or maybe the negative passion fuelled the other, more primitive need.

“Tell me you’ve missed me,” he mumbled through hot kisses down her throat.

She didn't have to, because it was so pathetically obvious—but she gasped, "You know I have. Lysander..." She tossed his tie, unbuttoned his shirt, spread greedy hands across his chest.

He shuddered and groaned. "I have to be back at that meeting in ten minutes. I'm going to totally humiliate myself."

She stilled. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come to see you, but I was so angry." Her hands still caressing his body, she forced her gaze to his. "I need my passport back."

His eyes met hers, unflinching. "And I need you to give us a chance—at least see what it is you're turning down before you play the coward."

Like the swinging of a pendulum, her ardour became anger again. "I lost my job. My parents are selling the house and staying here. My brother's studying here. You've made sure I have no life to return to. You're not giving me a chance to make a fair decision."

"You can't make a fair decision without coming to Persolis!" he snarled.

"I can't *think* when I'm near you!" she cried. "How can I make a fair decision if all I feel for you is this?" She dropped her hands. "And anger that you've put me in a cage? It's dysfunctional, Lysander. Nothing can be right between us if I resent you!"

He stilled, and slowly nodded. "You're right—again. But I can't let you go, Mari. My life's been *grey* the past month. I can't stand thinking you're half a world away from me!"

Yearning and something dangerously tender filled her, body and heart. "Wouldn't you rather I went and came back to you of my own free will, knowing how I feel?"

He wheeled away, breathing hard. "I think you already know how you feel about me, Mari. What you need to know is how you feel about my life. You need to come to Persolis *before* you go to Sydney." When she didn't answer, he added harshly, "I won't be there, if that makes it easier for you. Go and meet my mother and my people as Charlie's cousin—you've done that before, visiting Toby and Lia in their duchy, Malascos. We don't have to go public if I'm not there. Your passport will be waiting when you return."

It wasn't a request, and Mari knew two things: he wasn't going to give way on this, and he was right—she was being a coward. Slowly, she said, "All right." She moved away when he turned back with a blazing smile. "I'll play fair if you will."

That wasn't a request either.

Two weeks later

At the steps of the ducal residence, Mari stood waiting for the limousine, her hands in the Duchess's. "Thank you for making my time here so wonderful, Kat."

The dragon of her nightmares had become a purring kitten, if an elegant one. The Duchess—*Call me Kat*, she'd said the first day—lovely and well-spoken, was as warm and open-hearted as Lysander, with the same dancing in her eyes. She'd encouraged Mari to look on her as another aunt from the start, and by now Mari had almost forgotten her title. It was just like being with Charlie, Lia or Toby. She was so...ordinary. So *real*.

Kat squeezed the hands she held. "Thank you for giving me the chance to know you, darling girl. I've always wanted a daughter. Now I feel I have one... almost."

The last word was added hastily, with a comical look of guilt. The silent agreement that neither of them would speak of Lysander, apart from about his childhood, hadn't been broken.

Mari giggled, and kissed the Duchess's cheek. "Now I know where he got his audacity from."

Kat nodded, her dimples flashing. "The car's here."

Mari hugged her, and turned to pick up her bag.

"Mari, if I might give you one piece of advice?" Kat said softly.

Feeling fatalistic, Mari turned back to face her.

"The title is just a word, you know. I think you've seen that with me, with your cousins, but you're blinding yourself against my son. Beneath the job, and the robes for state occasions, he's just a man in love."

Mari pushed her lips together hard, to stop the foolish rush of tears. "I need space to see that, Kat—especially when he's been using his power against me. I have to go."

Sadness and acceptance filled the older woman's eyes. "I'll talk to him."

Another hug, fierce and loving, and she snatched up her bag and ran down the stairs.

Ten months later

From the middle of the long receiving line where the royal family greeted their guests, those especially invited to watch the new Earl of Haridis and his

Countess receive their formal titles, Sander watched the new Lady Mari Mitsialos, daughter of the Earl, with subdued hunger. It had been so long since he'd even seen her—longer since they'd been alone.

She was dressed for the occasion in a deep claret silk ballgown, her hair pulled up in a smooth chignon; she wore rubies and diamonds about her ears and throat; an IWC watch worth ten thousand euros adorned her wrist. She looked perfect—but she didn't look like his Mari any more, and he wondered if he'd created a monster in his efforts to win her.

Taki, Maria and Stavros had taken to their new lives like ducks to water. And though Sander had been the one to first propose the title, Taki had become an earl based purely on his brilliance in science and his dedication to his new country. The Minister for the Environment, a bored viscount, had gratefully relinquished the position when Taki had invented a toxic waste blanket that increased decomposition, making a cleaner country and improving the health of the villagers and townspeople living near toxic rubbish dumps. Taki had won the admiration of the press and the people without any help from Sander.

Stavros led his year at the university, and had everyone's respect.

Mari was the only member of the family who didn't come regularly to Persolis, or accept her place in Hellenia without reservation.

Her passport “problem” had cleared the day she'd returned to Orakidis City, and she'd left immediately for Australia, staying there six agonising weeks. Charlie had sent him a terse e-mail the day she went.

Mari needs space. Give her time or she'll never come back.

Much as he'd hated the dictum, he'd known Charlie was right. He hadn't contacted her in all that time—apart from one red rose delivered to her friend's apartment every week, with a card simply saying: *I'm waiting*.

He hadn't even known she'd returned to Hellenia until his mother had mentioned Mari's “latest call”. So Mari was calling his mother...so she'd returned...so she'd visited Malascos, met the people there, as well as in in Orakidis City... She'd visited Malascos, but she only visited Persolis when ambassadorial business took him from home. She wanted space, but he was suffocating without her.

He'd won his people's approval. He now performed all his duties, knowing Mari had been right—this was real life, and running from that basic truth hadn't

made him a better man. So he'd turned down the post with the United Nations, taking the post of Second Assistant to the Ambassador on the condition that Persolis came first. Sometimes he felt stretched to his limits, barely finding time to sleep...if only she was here, sharing his load...

For the past six months she'd only left the palace in Jazmine or Charlie's company, or to make her visits to Lia and Toby in Malascos. Jazmine's and Lia's pregnancies had given Mari an opportunity to help Charlie with affairs of state, and she'd shone. From formal affairs to visiting villages and towns in need of royal help, anything Charlie asked her to do she did—and she was winning the admiration of his people on her own merits.

Her father had been elevated to Hereditary Lord without dissent. Stavros was hailed as the new Viscount, heir to the new Earl, with enthusiasm, especially after a stint in Orakidis Hospital, when he'd saved a child's life. But Mari refused to see she deserved anything. "I'm only doing what anyone would do," she'd said the last time they'd met, at an official function a month ago. A night when she'd refused to see him privately, had barely glanced at him.

As he reached the royal family now, he bowed deeply before Mari. "My lady." He lingered a moment too long over her hand. He couldn't make his lips leave her gloved skin.

"Your Grace," she murmured, and tugged her hand.

He couldn't let go—not yet. "Mari *mou*," he whispered into her knuckles.

"Your Grace," she murmured again, her voice filled with meaning. He glanced up. She looked composed, even with a light blush staining her lovely honey-cream skin. She tilted her head at the long line of people waiting to greet her.

"Your pardon, my lady," he said softly, his fingers trailing over hers as he let go. "It's been too long since I saw you." *Since I touched you.* "My hands won't obey my mind."

"Stop it, Lysander," she whispered, her eyes reflecting her longing and her exasperation. "I'm not *ready*."

The next person in line was listening avidly to their conversation, under cover of meeting Stavros—but Sander no longer cared who knew how he felt for Mari. Right now he'd take any chance to talk to her he got. "When will you be, *eros mou*? It's been a year. I still love you and you still won't believe it."

Her chest lifted and fell with the quiet dragging in of her breath. She leaned into him, whispered in his ear. "The antechamber...after the ceremony."

His heart soared and his rebel body, anticipating the reunion, went into overdrive. He adjusted his ducal cape so his excitement wouldn't become public knowledge. "I'll count the minutes, *eros mou*," he whispered in her ear, touching

the pearly skin with his mouth.

She shivered, made a tiny sound—and he moved on at last, satisfied, to greet Toby, waiting for him with twinkling eyes.

“Sander, my almost cousin,” the gentle giant murmured with wicked humour. “Making assignations with your lady in the palace? Ah, those were the days. It makes me feel nostalgic.”

Sander grinned and shook hands with the commoner turned Grand Duke and Prince after his marriage to Lia. Everyone knew of Lia and Toby’s unorthodox courtship in the secret passageways of the Malascos palace, right under the nose of the autocratic old King, who’d wanted Lia to marry Max, the Grand Duke of Falcandis. Old King Angelis, confined to his room now, had totally forgotten his former dislike of the Australian firefighter turned Grand Duke. He adored Toby, loved the baby son born two months before, and firmly believed he’d manipulated events to make the marriage possible.

The minutes moved like snails as the ceremony droned on and on. An hour became two, while Taki, Maria and Stavros revelled in their new positions and Mari smiled like the Sphinx, gracious, mysterious—accepting what she couldn’t change, but not seeming to share her family’s shining happiness.

Not for the first time Sander felt doubt creep into his heart. He’d believed she loved him, hoped she truly wanted life with him. What if he’d been wrong? What if she still missed her free, anonymous life in Australia? Her family title now made that life almost impossible for her—and he’d been the first to suggest Taki’s elevation. In making her worthy of him, he’d ripped her life, her choice, from her.

He barely made it through the four hours of the reception without his hungry gaze following her around the room. He couldn’t remember what he’d eaten or drunk, what he’d said to his dinner partners. He could barely remember if they’d been old or young, male or female. All he’d known were the moments *she’d* stopped at his table, talked to him: precious seconds that had ticked by too fast.

Now the time had come. Watching, he saw her turn her gaze to him; her head tipped and she vanished into the crowd.

Moments later he made his way to the door at the other side of the room, walked down the deserted hall and back into the reception room and slipped inside the door of the private antechamber.

He closed the door behind him, ignoring the rich appointments in the gold-and-white room, the Persian rug and Chippendale desk. He drank in the sight of her, shoes kicked off and swinging in her hand. Ah, *that* was his girl, his Mari, and he was alone with her at last...

Her head, lowered at first, lifted and turned to him. “Don’t,” she said softly,

before he could smile or whisper her name with the hunger he couldn't restrain.
"We need to talk, and I can't think when we touch."

Her honesty robbed him of breath or thought. He nodded, and waited.

"You said you'd give me space, but your manipulation went on—the roses, the title for Dad," she said quietly, looking him in the eyes. "You still haven't given me free choice."

Pain and guilt pierced him. "I know." Hoarse words, honest admission. "I thought I was helping to make your decision easier."

Her eyes narrowed. "Make it easier for me to choose you, you mean," she replied, with weary anger. "I lost my life. I lost my job. Mum and Dad sold the house. And—I've changed. I'm not who I was a year ago. You've left me nothing to go home to."

"Is it so bad here?" he asked, his throat ripping as if broken glass had lodged there.

Her sad glance tore through his heart. "You don't know how big the choice is for me. You're not only the Duke now—you'd be Ambassador to the United Nations but for me, wouldn't you?"

Taken aback, he stared at her. "Only in the sense that you made me see that ignoring my duty was as wrong for me as it was for my people. I turned the position down because I had enough to do."

"How can I believe that?" she cried.

"I might have manipulated events around you, withheld the truth from you at the start, but I've never lied to you. I didn't want the position," he said quietly.

She dropped the shoes and snapped, "How would I know? All I know is since I came into your life you've given up an exalted position. How can I not think that it's because of me—that I'm holding you back?"

"I did it for the right reasons, Mari," he said, through a tight jaw. "I'm tied to my land, my people—but I don't think that's your deepest problem. Your problem is with yourself."

"I'm a commoner," she said slowly, her nostrils flared.

"Not any more."

"You can't change what I am." Her face hardened. "*Lady* is a word, Lysander. All I am is a commoner, with a word tacked on in front of my name."

"As am I—and Lia and Charlie. It's all any of us are. I'd have thought Charlie, Lia and Toby's experience would have taught you that."

She stared at him. "Nothing will change my upbringing. I'm a commoner. You're a blue-blood."

"My mother said you were blinding yourself to who I really am."

Impatiently he grabbed at a letter-opener from the exquisite Chippendale desk

behind him and pierced his thumb. “What colour is that?” he snarled, pointing at the droplet of blood welling from the cut. “If it was *blue*, I’d be dead.”

Mari sighed and shook her head.

“The problem was never the title, was it?” he asked, a vast sadness filling him. “I’ve done all I can to prove to you that we’re not so far apart as you think, but in the end it’s down to you. When did you first feel you weren’t as good as anyone else? When did you start to believe that no matter what you did you were replaceable, unworthy of love and a happy life?”

In her sweet eyes there was honest bewilderment. “It isn’t that, Lysander. I want to be loved, to be married—but I miss my life at home. I miss Australia, and the freedom to be me, to make mistakes without being watched. If I marry you, I’ll never have it back. How could we visit *my* life, the life I still love and will always miss?”

The grey mists filling him suddenly parted as he understood. “The same way the Crown Prince and Princess of Denmark do. They didn’t build themselves a palace in Tasmania, did they? They stay with her family and eat at the local pubs, visit her old haunts.”

“With the press there with them all the way,” she sighed.

He nodded and shrugged. “I’m sorry, Mari, but that’s a fact of life for you for the rest of your life—no matter who you marry. You’re the King’s cousin. But you can either run from it—pretend it doesn’t exist, as I did with my life—or you make it work for you, as Frederik and Mary do, by making everyone love you. The press love Mary’s origins, and the fact that she’s never tried to be anyone but herself.” Slowly, he added, “As they love Charlie, Lia and Toby. The ordinary royals—the fairy tale come to life. The people and the press lap it up, because it makes the nobility human.” One step, two; he lifted a hand, and as if mesmerised Mari took it in hers, bringing it to her lips, kissing his skin with tender hunger. So long since she’d been so close, so loving... The thrill of joy that always came at her touch ran through his whole body. “The people love your family, Mari,” he muttered, husky with his need for her. “And they love you for all you do for the country—always giving, without asking for anything in return. Has anyone mentioned your origins to you when you help the country? Has anyone said you don’t deserve your title, or that you’re not good enough for me?”

Mari frowned. “No, of course they haven’t. I’m the King’s cousin.”

Her palm-kisses were making him crazy to have more. Impatient with her lack of self-worth, he retorted, “It has nothing to do with Charlie. They love you for who you are—just as they love your whole family. The whole country knows by now that I want to marry you, yet there hasn’t been one word of dissent.

They're all waiting for the announcement, to join in the celebrations. You're my duchess already, in everyone's eyes but your own."

Still kissing his palm and fingers, she glanced up, startled. Rethinking her life. He waited for her to readjust.

"Lysander," she whispered, clinging to his hand. "Is that true?"

He understood what she hadn't asked. "My mother's waiting outside with the family ring, *eros mou*—the Persolis engagement ring. She adores you, and can't wait to welcome you to the family." When she didn't answer, but stood there dazed, he wound his fingers through hers. "Can I ask her in?"

Mari bit her lip, trying to dampen the hope that leaped into her eyes.

It was time to give her a tiny push. "All I have to do is call her phone once."

A breath shivered out of her. She frowned again. "Lysander...I don't know..."

It was his turn to lift her hand to his mouth, kissing her palm, her fingers, with lingering, loving sweetness as he said the words he'd fought against for months. He had to say them now, for her sake, because he truly loved her and wanted her to be happy.

"Tell me you don't love me, Mari. Look in my eyes and tell me you don't love me, that I'm not worth the life changes you'd have to make for me, and I'll make it all go away. You'll have your quiet life back in Australia. I'll never see you again."

Her eyes squeezed shut, and he held his breath, counting the moments. Did she love him as he loved her? Had he gambled her life on an empty premise?

Then, finally, she spoke. "I adore you," she whispered, "but if you ever manipulate me like that again I'll have to kill you."

With a shout of happiness, Sander snatched her into his arms and kissed her, hard and hungry. "I won't have to," he murmured between kisses. "You think I don't know you're going to arrange the rest of my life?" he added with a wicked grin.

She laughed and snuggled in to him. "Did you really have to rope in all my relatives, as well as the Diplomatic Corps?"

He chuckled and kissed her hair. "What can I say? You're a strong-minded woman. It only took over a hundred against one for an entire year before you finally gave in." He lifted her chin, making her look at him. "Say it, Mari."

She didn't pretend to misunderstand. "I love you, Lysander. I'll marry you, have your children...and, yes, I probably *will* run the rest of your life," she added, eyes twinkling with happy self-knowledge.

"My mother will be very relieved to know that," he said solemnly, his eyes dancing.

“Your mother *is* very relieved.” An amused voice came from the doorway. “I beg your pardon, but I’ve been waiting for you both to notice me these past few minutes.”

Mari ran to the Duchess. “Kat,” she whispered, and hugged her.

Kat held her tenderly. “Good girl. I’m glad you didn’t make it easy for him. Lysander needs a real woman with strong principles. You chose well, Lysander.” She smiled at her son, then turned back to Mari. “Now you really have become my daughter.”

“Thank you,” she whispered into the floral-scented embrace.

“No, I thank *you*, darling girl. Thank you for making this past year worthwhile, for becoming the Duchess he needs before you said yes.” The old Duchess smiled at her. “That’s what you were doing the past year, wasn’t it—taking royal lessons as your cousins did, making sure you could sustain the life and the pressures that would come with being Lysander’s wife?”

Startled by her insight, at her ripping aside all the other issues to find her core insecurity, Mari nodded and flicked a glance at Lysander. The pride and love in his smile turned her insides to honey-mush. Glad as she was for such a loving mother-in-law, she couldn’t wait...

“What am I thinking?” the Duchess laughed, and hugged her again. “A newly engaged couple want to be alone, and I keep talking. Here you are, son.” She pressed a small box into Lysander’s hand. “I’ll keep your secret for exactly an hour. If you’re not out and announcing your engagement by then, expect the room to be invaded.”

She closed the door behind her; Lysander gave her *that* smile, and Mari ran into his arms. “Fifty-nine minutes of kissing,” she murmured. He laughed and set the alarm on his watch, and neither said anything more—for exactly fifty-nine minutes.

EPILOGUE

The Summer Palace, four months later

IT WAS enough to make her believe in fairy tales...but this was *her* happy ending...

“Are you happy, *eros mou*?” Magnificent in a dark tuxedo, Lysander put his arm around her waist as they stood on the balcony usually reserved for royalty only. The intense interest of the people and press in the Duke and new Ambassador (he’d eventually decided to take the posting, at Mari’s urging) and his commoner Duchess—already gaining the respect of the diplomatic world with her caring and her need to help—had led to this unprecedented move.

“I don’t think I could possibly be any happier.” Mari stood beside her husband of one hour in a wedding gown made by Europe’s foremost new designer, emeralds and diamonds at ears, throat, wrists and fingers. They were on the balcony where she’d watched her cousins greet their people. Now she was the one waving and throwing flowers down to the smiling, cheering crowd, and she knew they were her people too.

She, Mari Mitsialos, was a duchess, an ambassador’s wife—but though both those things were important, they paled beside the core truth: she was going to be beside the man she loved for life.

The past four months had taught her how true it was: titles didn’t make people; people either made a title or lowered it. She’d worked hard—learning diplomatic language, meeting the people of Persolis and discovering their needs. She was still learning how to be a duchess from Kat, but she’d had the intense satisfaction of seeing her parents and her mother-in-law having fun meeting in the middle of their different lives. And though she and Lysander were both busy, they made time for each other every day, working in and around each other’s schedule. She’d learned to treasure a brief glance, a moment’s touch of hands—but for the next month, on the royal island, they’d just be a couple in love, and finally alone...

“Mari! Mari!” the people chanted, throwing roses to her. One made it high enough; Lysander caught it and, with a loving smile, handed it to his bride. She

kissed the crimson bloom and laid it against her heart. The cheers deafened her; the popping of flashes grew more intense.

“You know what they want—exactly what I want,” Lysander murmured, pride and love in his voice; and, in the joy overflowing from a heart bursting with happiness, she laid the rose on the balcony and turned into his arms.

As they kissed the roar of the crowd grew, and then went quiet—or maybe it was just that she couldn’t hear anything, see or feel anything but Lysander. Duke or Ambassador, he was just Lysander to her—the man she adored—and she was his bride, his wife.

She was truly blessed.

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TOO ORDINARY FOR THE DUKE?

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